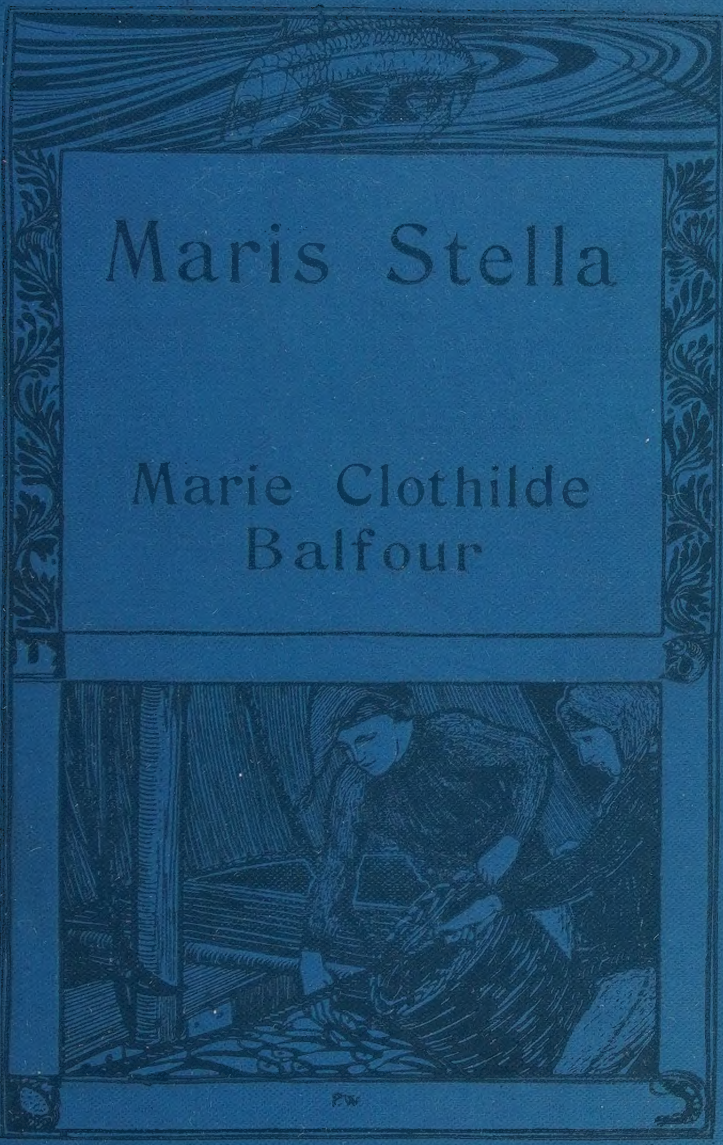




Maris Stella

Marie Clothilde
Balfour



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MARIS STELLA



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BY

MARIE CLOTHILDE BALFOUR

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P.W.

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TO

JOSEPH JACOBS AND ALFRED NUTT.

My dear Sirs :

If I venture to set your names in front of this little book, it is not because I put upon it an exaggerated value, but that I am glad to take the opportunity of expressing something of the gratitude I feel for the much that I owe to you. I could wish, in all modesty, that this little volume might give you pleasure; that I could thus make some inadequate return for the kindness and encouragement which, believe me, I have known how to appreciate.

Yours very faithfully,

CLOTHILDE BALFOUR.

DINARD, FRANCE.



MARIS STELLA

CHAPTER I

THERE were many places where one could wait and watch for the sight of a sail coming over the curl of the sea to the southward ; but none was better than the ramparts. Out at the Tête Blanche, where at night the beacon shone like a star, one was too much within the curve of the bay ; down on the sands, below Our Lady's Gate, there were too many people ; there were children playing, and women knitting and gossiping, whenever the sun shone and the air was calm and mild. And when one had been born, and lived amongst them, and knew them all, one had to stop and talk ; there was always some one to ask after, some story to hear ; and meanwhile a sail, or a thin grey tuft of smoke,

might steal up unawares out of the silver mist that veiled the going down of the sea.

Upon the ramparts this could not happen ; there were fewer who came here, and they were apt to keep aloof from each other. These were the young wives, new to the difficult time of waiting ; and the widows, who turned this way out of long habit, and to remember ; and presently, as the days grew shorter and less serene, those who came and looked, and went away to kneel before the side altar in the church, where the little boats hung, and the many tapers glittered and flickered as if they were blown this way and that by a cold breath coming from the further seas. And then back, with a more confident trustfulness, back again to the ramparts, to look out on the broad, shining, smiling water that held so many secrets within it.

'Poldine turned her face aside when such an one passed near her. It was late in the season, and most of the boats were in ; there were some, she supposed, who had good reason to be anxious,

But not she ; she knew already that her husband was likely to be one of the last comers ; the fishing had been good, and they had been delayed in getting away. He had sent her word by a comrade not to expect him before the beginning of the month, and she had barely a right yet even to look for a sail coming up out of the southward sea. But the *Dieu-Protège* was a good boat and a fast one, and the weather did not turn to storms ; it was one thing to tell herself that he could not possibly come yet, and quite another to sit at home seeming as if nothing in the world were going to happen to her presently ; as if Laumec were not already on his way homewards, and as if every nerve in her body were not tingling with expectation and excitement under her serene, smiling tranquillity. 'Poldine put her hand to her throat sometimes, and wondered whether it were tears or laughter that lay there, so big that she could hardly breathe.

It was pleasant upon the ramparts, these long, still autumn afternoons—pleasant, save for

the glimpse one could not but catch of those white, wan faces, with all their life centred in their straining eyes ; or of those others, who had known it all themselves—the wrench of parting, the joy of home-coming, the long, weary summer, and the winter that flew by so quickly ; and had known, too, the weary time of waiting, of waiting, at last, for one who never came. 'Poldine knitted her brows with a singular impatience when these thoughts came to her. She knew very well that such things were ; had known it all her life, had remembered it season after season when the boats set out for the fishings, and had thought of it when first Laumec and she met on the *quai* or in the streets, and she smiled upon him interestedly, because he was a Terreneuvas, and she had known none. But it had never stung her with such a sharp truthfulness as when she stood before Monsieur le Curé with Laumec, and had seen his eyes wander to the great ship that hung overhead, the quaint, ghostly thing that dangled from the roof, quivering and dipping in the draught of the

open doors as if she still felt the lap of water lifting and rippling beneath her. There were long, grey spiders' webs draped about her masts, and dust lay thick and white on her from bow to stern; she had been hung there long ago, very long ago it seemed from her build, by one who, perhaps, had waited on the ramparts out yonder, or prayed in the Lady-Chapel here, in vain. Or, perhaps, it had been in memory of a storm out-ridden, of a home-coming when hope had almost gone, of prayers that had found a tardy answer.

It seemed to 'Poldine, on her marriage-day, that the old ship was wrapped, not in a white shroud of dust, but in the grey fogs of the Banks, where Laumec must spend the best of his life, the cold, cruel fog that was half the danger, and more than half the terror, of those long hard months of toil and peril, when here at home the sun shone, and one was happy only to feel one's self alive. She shivered a little; the fog—the grey fogs of the Banks—crept up to her and touched her, with a sudden icy chill of dread and fear. . .

At that moment it seemed to her that already Laumec lay deep in the green water, and there was no one—nothing—but she and the fog that knew, that understood. And then the 'Ave, Maris Stella' rose up about her, the old familiar cantique that was woven in with all her memories, with all her life; and a warm sense of safety and accustomedness came with it, that brought the colour back into her face.

She looked down from the ramparts on the little crowd of women and children scattered on the sand below, and listened absently to the sound of their laughter. They were so gay, *ces bonnes gens*—these very good folk; so gay, so noisy, so easily amused, so quick to anger: they were always either laughing, or quarrelling, or crying—but certainly most often they were laughing. 'Poldine looked down on them now with a smiling contempt, for it seemed to her very foolish to make such a noise and fuss about everything, when it was so easy to be quiet and calm, and cheerfully reasonable, as she herself was; and then she let her thoughts wander

back again to her marriage day—such a little time ago, and she so young and unaccustomed in wifhood, yet distant by all the long dividing length of summer.

'Poldine lived with her mother in the Clos à la Dame, a tiny court in the oldest corner of the old town, hidden behind the jutting turret of an ancient house, and set in the midst of a tangle of narrow lanes and alleys. The stately old house had carved stonework and a coat of arms above its doorway: there had been, it was said, a princess who once was wont to sit at the great centre window, spinning her thread with a golden spindle, and sighing, sighing, as even princesses must sometimes do. And there was a certain white horse that clattered past beneath her window every day when the church bells rang the Angelus: a white horse, whose rider spoke always to the good princess, and begged her to marry him, for her land's sake. But the princess, spinning with the golden spindle and sighing, sighing, made no other answer. . . . That is all very long ago, to be sure, and yet

there are those who live in the Clos à la Dame, who say that even now when the Angelus rings, one may hear the white horse clattering up the street, the tiny stair-like street that bears its name; the street that leads nowhere else but to the old stone house with the tower, where the princess sat spinning her thread with a golden spindle—and to the tiny court that hides behind.

The Clos à la Dame is small, as to ground plan; so small, that the sun only touches the worn pavement at a high summer noon. But then, in the old times, when these houses were built, one practised a narrow neighbourliness; and in the Allée des Nonnettes, or the Rue de la Fosse Ouverte, or in the Rue du Cheval Blanc itself—and every one knows that it is much the widest—one would not need to have long arms to reach across from window to opposite window. And after all, high up in these old houses, where 'Poldine lived, there was certainly no lack of sun and sweet air, and the sight of wide blue water, that in winter was

lashed by the *Noroia* into a torment of purple and green ; for they stood well a-tip-toe on the shelving rock, and looked out cheerfully over the high encircling ramparts.

It was a big room, when one got up to it, this, that was 'Poldine's home. The house had been of consequence in its day, and there had lived in it perhaps some of those proud seamen who sailed, and fought, and looted, for their own hand, and whose daughters, it is said, slapped the face of princes. Here, where the sea air came in straight to the windows, was no ill abiding-place for a corsair's women-kind ; and when one looked at the bleached oak panelling of the walls, and the huge low beams of the ceiling, and the great hearth that yawned blackly at the further side,—one seemed to hear still the rustle of silks brought from over seas, and the tapping of high heels, and to catch the quaint mysterious scents that creep back to one from the past. . . . And even in its decay, and in its infinite change, it was still strangely beautiful and quaint.

In one corner of the huge empty hearth, a few bricks had been built together, which supported a little broken coal and a handful of *petit bois*, and over which hung a pot from a rusty iron tripod. There were no logs to fill the great hearth now, with a glorious roaring sheet of flame; but since the tiny fire did its work as well,—at least, as much work as 'Poldine asked from it—what need was there to complain? They were not rich, she and her mother; but there was always enough soup and bread for dinner, enough coffee for the morning, enough fruit when the summer came round, or cider when one was thirsty—and when one had enough, when one had all that one wanted, one was certainly not poor. . . . It was true that they wanted very little, 'Poldine and her mother; some bread, the good grey bread that all the world must eat, when one wants to be strong and to work well; a basket of vegetables at the market, a jug of cider—not the poor thin wine that makes the Parisians so white-faced, not the *piquette* that one drinks in bad seasons,

with grapes and what not in it to eke it out ; but the good strong cider of the Marais, the cider of the ‘Doux Auvêque,’ the best cider made of the best apples in the world (as they say—) ; what more was needed for two women, even when one was young and lusty and wholesomely hungry ?

There were two beds in the corners, draped with white curtains and covered with gay pink counterpanes of printed cotton ; and on the wall beside them, each had its own little gaudy gracious Virgin, and the sprig of green that had been blessed at church on the last Palm-Sunday. And there was a big double cupboard—the *armaïne*—of old cherry-wood, black and polished with age, and catching the sunshine on its ponderous brass hinges and locks ; and a chest, fine with ancient carving that would have made Poldine rich if she had sold it.

‘*Mais, pour sûr, on ne vend pas ça comme on jette des guerschôts*’—she said invariably, with an instinct of possession that was not to be overcome ; and the chest, like the *armaïne*,

and the quaint oaken chairs, kept its place against the bleached, worm-eaten panellings, that had once been dark and smooth and shining too.

It was a pity, perhaps, that the pale oak walls were not left in their own stately simplicity, but 'Poldine had a cheerful taste in colour; so they bloomed, like a flower garden, though less beautifully, in every shade of red and green and blue. There were innumerable tiny pictures of saints and angels bought at the fairs for a sou a piece. There were simpering heads of women taken from the tops of cardboard boxes, and coloured figures of soldiers and sailors cut out of the illustrated papers. And there were bunches of gaudy paper flowers and skins of oranges, carefully sewn up and dangling at the ends of threads, and all sorts of grotesque chenille monkeys and tinselled plush butterflies that 'Poldine had brought home from the fairs. Also there were shells and tufts of dried seaweed, and even some black, four-horned 'purses':—the purses that were lost long ago, when the sea swept inland over the great forest, and

over the villages and towns that now lie deep at the bottom of the water, and whence one may hear, as all the world knows, the sound of their church bells. And these purses that were so well-filled then, with the devil's money, paid for wicked heathen souls, were cast away upon the shore ; so that one may find them here and there, when the spring tides creep out to their farthest.

And on the high, narrow mantel-shelf, there was another Virgin and crucifix, and a scrap of green or blossom, set in a tiny vase, with a pair of tapers that were even lit, upon the great festivals ; and on either side, rows of photographs faded to a sickly drab, and some *faire-parts* and memorial cards, framed in cut out black paper.

. . . It was all very proper, very orthodox, very *bourgeois*, and very like a great many other such rooms ; only it was distinguished from them all, as 'Poldine herself differed from other women, in its exquisite orderliness, its infinitely careful arrangement and keeping, in contrast with the foolish triviality of its adornment. Yet not even the spotlessness of her floor, nor the

black shining polish of the *armaine*, nor even the big copper pan which was her greatest pride, made 'Poldine feel so richly and especially superior, as those neat marshallings of pictures, of faded photographs and *faire-parts*. ' *Tiens, maman !*' she said, contentedly, every time that she dusted them ; 'any one can see we come of good people, of people who knew how to do things becomingly.'

They were not rich, but no one dreamt of calling 'Poldine poor. She paid her rent regularly and owed no one a sou ; she had always as much sewing as she could undertake, for in that, as in everything else, she did her work with a neat perfection. And she was always able to spare an hour or two when there was anything going on, always dressed with an admirable simplicity, always wore a *coiffe* that was coquettish in its absolute whiteness ; and wherever she went, she always contrived to keep about her, her placid serenity, her little comfortable air of bourgeoisie respectability.

It was at the spring assemblée,—the Sainte

Ouine,—that she had first met Laumec, or at least that she had come to know him: in this tiny walled-in town, one rubbed shoulders some time or another with most of those who came about it. He was a Terreneuvas,—and 'Poldine surveyed him with a considerable interest. Autumn and spring, during the whole of her life, she had been used to the coming and going of the boats from and to the Banks; as surely as Christmas was followed by Easter, as certainly as the *grande Sainte Ouine* itself, the fishermen went away in the first days of spring, and returned,—most of them,—in the late autumn. But to her it had only been a thing to look on at, a thing outside of her life; a matter which she accepted with a certain condescension, as being below and beyond her. She did not come of a seafaring stock; the 'people who knew how to do things' had all been small—very small—shopkeepers; she belonged to a different 'gens,' and she knew it and appreciated it. But like every one else in the town, she had watched the *goëlettes* loading in the dock, and spreading

their wings as soon as the winter storms were over ; she had turned out to see the starting of the big steamers that carried away a couple of thousand men with them ; she had bought nuts and *cimereaux* at the stalls that stood in rows upon the jetties ; she had enjoyed the noise and laughter of the crowd, with a kind and cheerful tolerance. And when the steamers drew slowly out from the quay, she had gone as every one else did, to the Tête Blanche, to see the last of them, and to listen to the men, who, clustered on the rigging, sang the 'Ave, Maris Stella.' And she had gone out, too, to see them come home again, and had noticed, here and there, a face that was white and weary, and eyes that sought anxiously for one that had not returned.

But to 'Poldine, who had nothing to do with it all, it was only amusing,—certainly amusing, though, of course, she was sorry for them : and when she met Laumec, she looked at him with a mingling of curiosity and a gentle condescension, and a sense as of old familiarity.

'*Tiens*, you are a Terreneuvas ?' she said, very

graciously. 'And you came home in the "Gallia" last autumn? Yes, I was there. I think you may have seen me. *Voyons*—I was quite near the landing.'

Laumec looked contrite.

'You see,' he explained, 'they were all there, my mother and my father and Fantic,—that is one of my brothers. Of course I ought to remember,—only when one's people are there, one sees no one else.'

'Poldine smiled upon him the more kindly that she felt annoyed: though what, after all, could it matter to her whether Laumec Le Braz had seen her or no, two—three—months before? When she went home presently, a desire not to talk of him spurred her into loquacity, and she mentioned his name. Her mother, a tiny nervous old woman, who had a habit of standing about the dusky corners of the room, nodded her head wisely under her wide-winged coiffe.

'Le Braz? I know,'—she said, timidly shrill. She always did know everything about everybody. 'Poldine had long ago discovered, when she

would speak ; but sometimes she was obstinately silent. To-night, she was garrulous. . . . 'I know. The boy may be well enough,—he has good blood in him. But his father,—they live in a cabin, a poor place, on the high road,'—and she pointed with her chin eastward, where the mainland lay.

'A cabin,'—and the wide loops of her cap fluttered up and down as she nodded. 'No better than a *baraque*,—they are Bretons. Yes, they came from Basse-Bretagne, and they had a good name in their own place, it was said ; I remember, they were called Le Braz de Kerminihi.'

'But how—?'

'Poldine's mother fluttered her hands vaguely in front of her.

'What do I know, except that—it is *so*?' she quavered. 'There were many children, some said there were even twelve, but I think they cannot have been quite so wicked. *Enfin* ! the family took away the daughters—there were two—and put them into a convent. Yes, they were

certainly quite rich people, the family, and it is a good name, Le Braz de Kerminihi.'

'Poldine looked out of the window at the sea with an unusual interest.

'And the sons?' she said, presently.

The big wings of her mother's coiffe fluttered again.

'There is one who drives a cab,' she explained, 'and that is a very respectable thing to do. And you tell me one is a Terreneuvas, and there are several that have gone away. Perhaps they may be—only soldiers!' she said, with a little disdain in her tremulous voice.

'Poldine still stared out of the window thoughtfully, and pictured to herself the little house on the high road, and the old people—Laumec's father and mother. She was quite sure she knew what they must be like. . . . There was a man calling for rubbish in the streets below, she could hear him quite distinctly—

' . . . *des guerchôts à vendre? Par-r-r là Mesdames!*'

No, it didn't matter, they hadn't any rags to sell;

not to-day. And the crier was going round the town, she could hear the roll of his drum somewhere near the convent of the Dames de St Aaron. Laumec's father had come down in the world, evidently, but it was a great thing to know one came of good people, nevertheless. And now that he was old, and probably white-haired, one need not be ashamed of him. As to his mother, she would certainly be one of those grave, long-faced Breton women, who smiled so rarely, and yet were doubtless very good to their own, and certainly religious. She had gone to meet Laumec, and therefore he had not noticed her, 'Poldine, as he might have done.

‘ . . . à vendre ? Par-r là, mesdames ! ’

She frowned a little, and then coloured suddenly. That she, so calm and sensible always, should care ! He was certainly—yes, certainly—nothing to her. . . .

‘ The crier is going round the town,’ she said, looking vaguely into the dim room behind her. ‘ I think it will be for the Veuve Hervé's sale. . . . I hear him up by the *chapelle*. . . . And

they say that one of the *bonnes sœurs* is dead, one of the Dames de St Aaron. They bury them all in white, I've been told. . . . Yes, you were speaking of the Le Braz, to be sure. Well, this one—Laumec, they call him—is a well-grown fellow enough, tall and dark, and—yes, one might say he's handsome. Very black, very serious—one can see he comes of good blood,' she said.

A sudden light flamed up from the small lamp, and the white cap bobbed nervously about it.

'Yes—good blood, I don't deny it; but they're Bretons . . . *c'sont des bret's*.'

'Poldine looked at her mother severely.

'One should not say these things,' she said. 'If they are Bretons, dame! it isn't their fault, and one ought not to blame them. And besides, what has that got to do with it? It's much more important to come of . . . good blood.'

She turned away from the window, and sat down to her work with a tranquil superiority.

'It makes a great difference,' she thought, 'all that . . . and Le Braz de Kerminihi sounds

very well. He certainly isn't the same as a common fisherman—a Terreneuvas like the others—a mere stupid paysan—' She had a habit of leaving her sentences unfinished—even to herself. Perhaps they led her sometimes further than she was just then prepared to go, . . . or, perhaps, it was merely her thoughts that wandered. At any rate, several times that evening, before she folded away her work for the night, she found her hands lying idle in her lap, and her mother watching her furtively, under the bobbing wings of her wide coiffe. But it was not that she was thinking of Laumec ; no, certainly not !

That had been the beginning of it ; once or twice more she had met him, and then the spring had come, and he had gone away ; he had asked her if she could not be there to see him off. This time 'Poldine did not buy nuts or oranges ; she did not even look at the *Chevaux de-bois* outside the Grand' Porte—she did not want to look, for only a few days ago she had ridden on one, and Laumec had held her in the

saddle. . . . All the town was out, and the quays were crowded ; one would have said it was a fair—a very gay fair—for every one was laughing. There would be all the summer to weep at home, if one wanted ; and besides, it was so easy to these people to be gay, and to make a noise. 'Poldine did not laugh—she did not understand why one should be foolish enough to do that ; but she was always very cheerful, very sensible, only to-day it was so grey, and so cold, and so . . . *enfin* ! if one tried very hard, one could keep on smiling. Presently the steamer, with its load of Terreneuvas, had drawn away from the quay, and she found herself carried along to the Tête Blanche with the crowd that sped that way to see the last of it. It passed close enough for one to distinguish them, the men swarming all over the deck and the rigging, and stretching out their hands in sign of farewell ; Laumec waved his cap to her. . . . Yes, it was a detestable day, *un temps affreux*—or something. . . . They were singing the cantique, the ' Ave, Maris Stella,' and it seemed to 'Poldine

that she could hear Laumec's voice,—his voice that was so strong and manly, and yet could be so soft. At least he had seen her this time ; he had even been sorry—a little—to say good-bye.

‘ Atque semper Virgo.’

That had tangled itself already into many memories, that cantique, now she came to think of it. She had sung it at her first communion, for instance ; and she had really looked very nice, all in white ; and what a big candle she had carried ! And she had sung it down at the shore every year, when on All Souls' Day, the *Fête des Trépassés*, the priest had prayed for those that lay deep within the waters, here, and over seas, and at the Banks. And again at the Assumption, at the Notre Dame d'Aôut, when the seamen and the fishermen walked in the procession, singing, and carrying upon their shoulders the stately ancient ship that a great Corsair had given to the town ; and on the Fête of the Rosary, and in the warm sweet-scented dusk of the Month of Mary. . . . She had heard it chanted year

after year, in church and out of church, so often that she had grown careless to it ; when the Terreneuvas came and went at either end of the summer, and when they walked barefoot in pilgrimage to the tiny tapestry-hung Chapel of Les Guêrets, to give thanks for their safe return. (For the Virgin of Les Guêrets was herself the *Etoile de la Mer*, the Stella Maris, and had a great gold star behind her head.) And besides, it was engraved on so many of the tall stone crosses that looked out over the sea into the very teeth of the terrible *Noroiia*, where the waves came churning to their feet in a furious turmoil of purple and green and white ; the crosses where the women brought flowers sometimes, and sat watching for the boats, the great crosses that stand like sentinels all along the coast. But this time it sounded differently in her ears, with a new sweetness, and a new pain ; it was surely Laumec's voice that sang it, and he was in peril of the sea ; would there indeed be a star to guide him safely home again ? And also there came with it a

sense of coming happiness ; for some day, she remembered, it would be sung at her marriage.

That summer was different to all the others that had gone before ; different, and more various in its elements. Her life had been always so simple ; a little food, a little pleasure, and a great deal of work, and at night, a sound untroubled sleep. Now she carried an unspoken anxiety about with her ; she trembled and crossed herself when the wind rose ; she went more often, in the early mornings, to mass ; and she cared less, much less, for the gay season ; the assemblées, the regattas, and the coming of the summer visitors. She liked better to sit at her window, her sunny, seaward window, and to look out across the water ; the sound of music, and voices, and of many street cries came up pleasantly to her from the town, and it was not at all lonely. And then there were the church bells that rang for the Angelus, and for Mass, and for the raising of the Host, which was very solemn, even from here, to think of ; there was little Noguette, the smallest

of all the bells, that rang for the *Messe des paresseux*—the eleven o'clock one; and for Couvrefeu, which was at ten o'clock at night: and Gros Gogo, the biggest, whose voice had been so beautiful, and even now, when it was cracked, was very rich and deep and soft. It was he who rang for funerals, and for fires, and, in the old days, when the English came in sight with their ships; and all the sorrows he had known, and the suffering, and the tears, had got into his great voice and made it tremulous and uncertain. And then there was all the gay bugling and drumming from the Caserne de la Misericorde, the Caserne, which had been a chapel once, as the old people could almost remember: and the sound of singing which came up from the Orphelinat of the sisters of St. Vincent de Paul, and from the house of the Dames de St. Aaron, up the Allée des Nonnettes. No, it was never dull, but it was very peaceful: and it was a good place to begin the learning of that long lesson of patience which the women of the Terreneuvas

must needs know by heart. The summer was hot and gay, and intolerably long; but it passed nevertheless, and 'Poldine watched the days shortening and the leaves fading with a wonderful sense of fulfilment.

Then—he came home. Some of the boats were in already, but not many: the steamers had started early this year, and were far ahead of the *goëlettes*. There had been fair winds and a calm sea—golden weather; and the 'Gallia' climbed into sight over the edge of the waters, out beyond the furthest fringe of the rocks and the lighthouse on the 'Queue de Rat' a few hours before she had been expected. All the town was out to greet her; the same long black crowd upon the *Tête Blanche* that had watched her away in spring: the same waving caps and stretching hands from the men that swarmed in the rigging: and the same song, a little louder, perhaps, a little more vibrant with the joy of home-coming once more,

'Ave! Maris Stella.'

It was taken up by those on land, and 'Poldine found herself singing it too, as she walked back to the quay where the steamer was swinging into its place, and sought amongst the crowd of faces for Laumec. Yes, but to-day she looked also about her with clearer eyes, and saw that there were some there who had no one to meet, no one even to watch for: and others who came down every year, in the vague hope of hearing something certain. There was even old Marie Barron, whose husband had set sail thirty and three years ago, her husband, to whom she had been married just twenty days, and who had never—never come back; she was a cheerful old woman who had long outgrown regret, and yet she came down to meet the steamers and the goëlettes, with a wistful eagerness about her, an anxious questioning for which there was never any answer. And in her tiny room, the door, 'Poldine knew, stood open even at night, lest *he*, coming, might find it shut against him . . . and Marie Barron was so cheerful

and so full of laughter, such a red-faced, white-capped, commonplace old washerwoman.

Laumec was almost the first to get on shore, and he fought his way through the crowd straight to 'Poldine, only to pause and falter with an odd shy uncertainty as soon as he actually reached her side.

'Eh *b'en!*' he said very awkwardly, his cap in his hand, and his cheeks red beneath the bronzing of sun and sea; '*Vous v'là*, Ma'mselle 'Poldine; you see, I have come back.'

He could find, it seemed, nothing better to say; but it did not matter very much after all. That first glance at each other had told too much and had spread a bashfulness between them; there were no words that were not altogether incompetent. She was only conscious that he was even taller, darker, handsomer than she had remembered him, and that when he looked at her, there seemed no need of speaking, no need of anything else; and he, too, found her transformed and grown suddenly more intimate, more desirable. They let themselves be buffeted

hither and thither by the crowd almost in silence ; till 'Poldine, looking up at him radiantly, murmured something about his mother. He started and put his cap on to his dark head.

' *Mais pour sur,*'—he said, ' I must go home,—they will be wondering. Dame ! the mother will think,—but let us get out of this '—and using his broad shoulders, he cleared a passage for her through the crowd. 'Poldine smiled contentedly ; she was used to doing things for herself, and it was therefore the sweeter to have some one who cared to do them for her. Laumec looked down upon her with an admiration which was infinitely respectful, as she walked beside him, the top of her cap barely reaching his shoulder ; she was so neat and well appointed in her trim dress and tidy shawl, so spotless in her coiffe ; her capable hands were so white and unroughened except on the forefinger, and her face was so fair with her sheltered, indoor life. She was so soft, so small, so wonderfully serene and gracious, there was none like her, none,—except indeed, and that was wrong even to think of, the little smil-

ing kind-eyed Lady that had a place in the cabin of every goëlette, to watch over them and bring them safe home. And 'Poldine was so much above him; she was no *paysanne*, but a *bourgeoise*, and he was almost afraid of the little air of superiority that sat so becomingly about her: he could not look at her without remembering that whatever his fathers had been before him, he was only a Terreneuvas, burnt and blistered by the sun and rain and wind, and rough as men are who live amid the brawling of the sea.

'I am not fit,' he said, very humbly, 'to be seen beside you, Ma'mselle 'Poldine, and that is the truth. I will go home and let *la mère* see that I am safe; and then later, when I am cleaner, perhaps,'—he paused and looked sidelong at her,—'It will be a beautiful night, and everyone will be out,' he said entreatingly. 'The *chevaux de bois* are at the Grand' Porte, the very same that were there before I went away. Don't you remember when I held you on,—it was a little red horse with yellow spots,

—it's so long ago, you may have forgotten. But perhaps you would like another ride,—and if you would let me hold you,'—he said ; and somehow she found her hand in his. She went out later, and she and Laumec took part in the loud jollity of the crowd ; the flaming lights of the roundabouts and of the lottery stalls shone very gaily, and the narrow streets of the old town were alive with laughter and merriment. Up above the Grand' Porte, looking down upon her children, stood the Virgin which had been found miraculously floating in the sea in a stone boat ; the Virgin who had once and again saved the town from the English, and who gave her especial protection to the Terreneuvas and Islandais. She looked down upon them, when they passed beneath, with a strange kind wisdom and pity ; she knew so much that was hidden to them,—the long changing past, when their fathers' fathers had come and gone about her, the ancient days of war and wealth and faith, the things that had been seen and suffered by the old dumb houses, and the flagging of the streets ;

the very stones in their silence, cried aloud in her ears. And especially she knew the secrets of the sea, and so she looked down upon her children, the Terreneuvas and the Islandais, with an exceeding pity.

Laumec and 'Poldine paused a moment to look up at her, their attention caught by the flicker of the tapers about her, and the reflections of the lamps below, in the glass that closed her in ; he took off his hat and crossed himself, with a warm simple gratitude in his eyes. Nothing, he was sure, of serious evil could happen to the town so long as she stood guard above the great gate and smiled down upon her children ; one was safe from all peril of the sea within the walls on which she kept her watch. But for her sons, the Terreneuvas and the Islandais, she had a more especial protection, and a warm remembrance of all that he owed to her came over him irresistibly ; there was so little that he could do, or say to prove that he was not ungrateful.

'Je vous salue, Marie.'

And 'Poldine had her own thoughts, too ; she

watched the tapers flickering about the statue, and higher, above the huge masonry of the low twin towers that defended the Grand 'Porte, she saw a star set singly in the broad purple of the sky. A star . . . and her thoughts wandered to the cantique that had been sung just a little while ago, and it rose unbidden to her lips; she wondered, idly, when she would hear it again. But Laumec caught the words she scarcely breathed, and by some sudden, happy perception, he answered her incontinent.

‘ They will sing that, ’Poldine,’ he said, ‘ for us, when we are married.’

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Yet it had not come about so easily nor so soon, as that night they had expected. There were a dozen difficulties in the way, which had to be surmounted; and perhaps if they had cared less for each other, they might have given way before them. But 'Poldine only smiled serenely when her mother, plucking up a sudden spirit, spoke slightly of the Terreneuvas, and

disdainfully of the Le Braz ; and smiled still when gossips came to her with tales about Laumec and his brothers, and with long faces of warning and discouragement. She told it all to him as soon as she saw him, with a warm delight of confidence that never doubted ; and even when he grew troubled and contrite, and told her honestly that some of these things, at least, had been true of him in the past, she only smiled again. For it was the future, and not the past, that she was concerned with, and she had no atom of doubt—of herself.

And he, too, had met with opposition ; his father, in sober interludes, flared into anger, and bade him seek a wife of his own standing, a name fit to mate with Le Braz de Kerminihi ; and Laumec had gone open-eyed and loud with laughter to tell 'Poldine that she—she, forsooth !—was not good enough for the like of him. But his own evident humility had lessened the sting of it, and she had smiled still, though she promised herself that she would remember it—some day.

And presently these things had fallen away, and there was nothing more to keep them apart; nothing—for the one matter that had gone nearest to dividing them, had been overcome in its turn by Laumec's exceeding humility.

He had taken her, when all was arranged, to see his father and mother, in the cabin on the edge of the high road that led eastward into the heart of France. It was not what she had persuaded herself it would be ; no rose-covered cottage, not even a cottage at all ; only a pile of wood and turf against a brick-built chimney stuck down on the very margin of the road. She was glad to sit outside in the sunshine, and not to venture herself within ; this narrow place, where a dozen children had been born and brought themselves up, seemed to be over filled still with the memory of them. The father was a shrunken heap of patches falling into rags, who trembled piteously in a forced sobriety ; the mother, full-fleshed and noisy, with long stiff hairs sprouting from the hanging folds of her cheeks and chin. There was nothing in all

this loud, cheerful dirt and misery, nothing to recall the good blood or the respectable estate from which they had fallen; nothing—save, perhaps, a turn of Laumec's head upon his shoulders, and the long slim hands of his brother Mic'.

'Poldine had sat and looked and listened, herself a little silent, but impressively polite; smiling when Madame Le Braz exploded in laughter, accepting the cider that was brought to her as amiably as the good wishes and broad jokes that came with it. She was not unhappy in the midst of it all; she felt herself so infinitely, unmistakably, superior, that it was rather pleasant than otherwise to observe the rudeness of these . . . *paysans* . . . herself trim with all the *bourgeoise* neatness born in her. She was quite aware of the excellent material of her dress, of the small spotless coiffe lying on her glossy fair hair, of her smooth and velvety skin, and her cheeks and hands pale from her indoor life; she knew it all, and prized it all, as something infinitely

more precious than mere beauty. And so long as Laumec saw it too—well, then she had not come here for nothing. Presently she went away, still smiling and gracious and he followed her miserably.

‘I think,’ she said, after a side glance at him, ‘that when we are married, I might stay in the Clos à la Dame, with my mother. It is a very good room indeed, and most respectable.’

Laumec looked at her with something that was nearly despair. ‘So long as you marry me at all!’ he said, heavily. ‘They’re my own people—I’ll say nothing against them. But—you might have been a queen, as you sat there, ‘Poldine: so clean and white and small; and everything else so horrible—I never felt before how little right I had to ask you to marry me;’ he said, with dejection.

She smiled upon him radiantly. Since he perceived it—that she was so—so—different—she was perfectly satisfied; she expected him

to be as proud of her as she was of herself. And it was the knowledge that he saw and admired that in her which she herself prized, the exquisite and cleanly neatness, the gracious serenity, which she forced herself always to practise, that had first drawn her to him; she could not have forgiven him had he thought her a shade less perfect. As it was, she was glad he had seen her in the cabin and recognised her to be as white and soft and superior as she felt herself to be.

‘The Clos à la Dame,’ she repeated, ‘is a very good place, and quite respectable.’

He looked at her adoringly and irrelevantly.

‘You looked like a queen—sitting there;’ he said.

Then came the wedding, a very grand one, in the eyes of the Le Braz family, though ‘Poldine declared it was no more than was strictly necessary. She wore a white dress, and a veil, and orange flowers; Laumec was rather afraid of anything so fine, and treated her with an abject politeness. In the church

he was so much overcome that he forgot, in putting on the ring, to try to pass it over the joint of her finger; and it was only a smothered laugh behind him, and a satisfied dimple at the corner of 'Poldine's mouth, that made him aware of his failure. But he smiled unconcernedly; he had no fear of being ruled against his will by this soft white creature who, of course, would obey him. Later, they walked in couples through the streets, 'Poldine's white train sweeping the dust, for not even her tidy spirit could brave convention so far as to lift it up; and they sang all the old songs that are always sung at *noces*.

‘Meunier, tu dors; ton moulin va trop vite—

Meunier, tu dors, ton moulin va trop fort.’

And then there was the déjeuner, and the cold supper, with more music, and many more songs: handsome Mic', Laumec's brother, sang ‘Biniou, mon biniou—’ till one was near crying; and then as a change gave them ‘Le Devoir avant tout.’ Ah, how they laughed! even

'Poldine felt as if she could not smile radiantly enough, though the music that rang in her ears was simpler and more solemn, the cantique that was only sung at the marriage of maidens, the 'Ave, maris stella,' that seemed to make her more irrevocably the wife of a Terreneuvas. And she could not forget that it was March already, and in three weeks—only three!—Laumec must go.

Well! for good or evil, time will not stay; the three weeks had gone, and with them, Laumec. She was alone again in her cheerful sunlit room in the Clos à la Dame, behind the jutting tower and the house of the Princess, where still, at the time of the Angelus, one might hear the passing of the white horse. 'Poldine looked down now and then from her window as she sat over her work, and smiled as she thought of the story; it seemed to her as if the good princess were still busy below at her great carved window, spinning her thread with a golden spindle, and sighing as even princesses must sometimes do. But the white horse had come and gone, and the

princess had answered not at all the words of its rider ; now she must needs wait, and wait, till once more he spoke to her . . . And up above, at her little seaward window in the Clos à la Dame, 'Poldine sat and worked all the long summer through ; listening sometimes to the gossip her mother brought her from the market, or the long babble of a garrulous neighbour ; listening more often to her own thoughts, and waiting, waiting, like the princess, till Laumec should ride back to her on the white horses of the sea. . . .

And now, at last, it was autumn ; the sky was calm and clear, the white water heaving in a glassy smoothness ; her work was laid by, and, for the present, she would take in no more to do. She would spend her days in the sunshine upon the ramparts, where other women went also, yet with a kindly comprehension, left her in peace ; it was pleasant, very pleasant here in the golden stillness of these tranquil days. Down below, the children played on the sand, and their mothers laughed and chat-

tered ; behind 'Poldine, the bells sang out the hours over the high steep roof of the old town ; and here and there beside her, others looked across the water too, the wide, still water that held so many secrets within it. And out of sight, somewhere over that shining sea, how many boats were creeping homeward, and how many were to come home no more. . . .

'Poldine lingered on the ramparts day after day, till the sun sank in a blaze of saffron and silver ; and, day after day, all sense of trouble fell away from her, and she fulfilled her waiting in a strange peacefulness. She was so sure—though she could not have told why—that Laumec was safe, and near her, that when, at last, a sail crawled up against the sky and presently they told her it was the *Dieu-Protège* herself, she only smiled tranquilly with a fulness of content ; there seemed no need for words, and the choking sense of tears and laughter had gone from her throat. She lingered a little to watch the goëlette

coming in through the narrow, difficult channel, and dropping her anchor in the bay; she waited till her sails were furled, and the black specks that were men, and one of them Laumec, climbed down her side into a boat and made for the shore; and then she turned and sped to the Clos à la Dame, where, rather than at the landing-place, she had chosen to await his coming.

And about her, in the golden autumn sunshine, and under the wide sky, there was certainly, it seemed to her, a sound of singing; the same music that was already woven into her life—the song of girlhood and marriage, of departure and home-coming, the song that was both a prayer and a thanksgiving on the lips of the wife of a Terreneuvas: Hail! Star of the Sea. . . .

CHAPTER II

LAUMEC jumped out of the boat, as she came up to the quay, and left his comrades to see to her fastenings. No doubt they were as anxious to be off as he, but they were less quick on their feet, and he laughed a little to himself as he sped up the long slope and left them behind him; then he slackened his pace, and pushed his *berêt* back on his head, as he paused to look round him, and to draw a long breath of the sweet home air.

It was early November, and the low sun spread a golden mist over everything; the sea, the further shores, the walls and roofs of the old town, and the single pointed spire, were all tinted and outlined in gold against a lavender sky. There were grapes and pears piled for sale on the barrows outside the Grand' Porte;

there was the coming and going of people, the white familiar coiffes, the blue blouses, the cracking of whips, and the cheerful commotion of a surrounding life. The long loneliness of the sea, and the terror of the fogs, the months of rain and wind and labour, fell away from him like a grey cloak of memory; he had left all that behind, and he was at home again. He did not say it to himself, for his words were few and did not sit closely to his thoughts; but he had a dumb perception of the change, and he turned involuntarily to look back at the goëlette, riding at anchor in the bay, with a sense of wonder whether he had truly been so lately a part of her.

‘*Hé! vous autres,*’ he said, plunging his hands deep into his pockets, and glancing at the men who had come about him. ‘*C’est tout de même diantrement bon,* to come home again to the old place; and one is never too sure . . . after the fog and the water and the wind out there, it is good to see the sun again. Ah! one never sees the sun, the real sun, but in France.’

Pierre, the parrot-nosed mate from the ferry steamer, looked at him with a quizzical gravity.

‘And there’s never a sun in France, dame! except in November.’

‘Well—there isn’t, as far as I am concerned. And after all, it’s as hot as summer to-day.’

‘*C’est pò’ vrai.*’ And Pierre stuck his cigarette behind his ear with a chuckle and a stare of defiance.

Laumec surveyed him with a smile lurking under his melancholy brows. ‘*Tu t’engraisses, Pierre!*’ he remarked critically. ‘You grow fat, my friend. And you grow stupid, too, or instead of telling me that I lie, you would give me the news. *Nom d’un chien*, when a man has been away half a year, he doesn’t want any of your nonsense! and all the same, it is good—ah, but good, I tell you—to get back.’

There was a general nod of comprehension. Here, too, as well as on that other rock along the coast, one lived truly ‘au péril de la mer’; they were all more or less her children, and one way or another, by her they mostly lived.

By her, too, in the long run, many of them died ;—they understood. Then they gave him, volubly and incoherently, such news as occurred to them.

‘*Le vieux Michel* is dead. ’Twas in February, and very cold ; they say he had *le sang gélé*.’

‘Titine Ménon is married. She got a man from Rennes ; he was here on a job. It was all done in a hurry, and she’s away with him.’

‘And Tiénon Boutin is married, too, to old Pacquart’s daughter, that big girl. They say it was time—’

‘Yes, yes, but you remember Leroux, the blacksmith,—he fell down the cliff at St Madon, and broke his neck, and his wife sold the business, and set up a grocery shop. She’s a mere slip of a woman, not fit to be left alone.’

‘Ah ! but my wife says she knows how to put it on, all the same. Why, she was asking thirty sous for a miserable *râteau*.’

‘Yes, and she has visitors already,—look at Pierre blushing . . .’

‘ . . . *Veux tu bien te taire, sale espèce de cochon . . .*’

Laumec listened to it all idly, more taken up with the sense of being at home once more, than concerned with what they said. He would hear it all presently again, told and re-told by one and the other ; but it was enough just now to stand there laughing, and but half attending, with the pleasant consciousness that presently he was going home to 'Poldine. But suddenly his ear was caught by a familiar name, and he roused himself to listen.

‘ What ! La Goutte ? ’ and Trénoüec, one of the men from the ‘ Bac,’ spat contemptuously, and protruded his thick bristled lips, ‘ her harvest time is the winter, *mon gosse*. . . . She thinks nothing of us stay-at-home summer folk, *dame* ! Nor yet the ones that come, for they wouldn’t look at her.’

‘ It takes a sailor to stomach her,’ and Pierre drew down his long upper lip. ‘ It’s only when the days grow short, and the nights long, and the goëlettes come into the bay, that La Goutte

leaves her corner, and creeps out to *faire la noce*.'

'*L'Ange de Terrenewvas !*'

And there was more laughter, and some jokes, of a sort to be conceived.

Laumec listened more gravely.

'It's a cursed pity,' he said, half regretfully, 'that she's come to that. There's no harm in her, and I remember when she was the prettiest girl in the Clos-poulet, though the wildest.'

His neighbour smiled broadly.

'Perhaps !' he said. 'I've forgotten, mon Dieu ! And if you haven't seen much of her lately,—well, perhaps you've forgotten, too, what she is like *now*. But you'll see, you'll see ; she meets every boat that comes in. Yes ; she'll be up there at the Grand' Porte ; you'll have to give her a *mique*, for the sake of old times.'

Laumec turned away impatiently.

'I've got a wife at home,' he said. 'I've done with all that sort of thing. And—La Goutte hasn't spoken to me these three years back.'

He started off homewards without waiting for

more, a sudden ill humour and dejection having seized upon him. La Goutte—what was she to him—now? He had not seen her, except at a distance, for all those years; she had had the grace, the decency, to keep out of his way. As well she might, since, if she had chosen, she might have been his wife. Laumec bit his lip as he remembered all that he had almost forgotten. He had meant—certainly, he had meant—to marry her; but Marie was so wild so odd, so—*legère*, that she had left him with his kisses warm on her lips, and had not chosen to come back. . . . Well, he had felt it very much at the time. And afterwards, when he heard what she had become, he took it coolly, and with a certain satisfaction that he was well quit of her. Yes, he had almost forgotten all that, it was so long ago, so finished, so—done with; there had been nobody since, but 'Poldine. And yet to-day, he had a strange feeling about it—a feeling he could not understand; as if something were going to happen, something that had—somehow—to do with La Goutte. He felt, even,

as if he were afraid. He swore at himself silently, and wondered, again, what had come over him ; he had reached the Grand' Porte, and he looked about him irresolutely. This way was the nearest, but it led right past the café where she—La Goutte—would be waiting ; and that strange feeling which he could not understand made him wholly unwilling to meet her. Or he could go home by the quay, turning in by the next gate, and he would reach 'Poldine that way, without seeing—the other ; it seemed to him that, if she merely spoke to him, he would carry home some uncleanness to his wife. And yet—it was all folly, a most extraordinary folly, and he would not give way to it.

He turned in through the gate resolutely, without quickening his pace : yet he nearly turned and fled as he came abreast the wide open cabaret, where a woman stood, laughing shrilly with the men about her. When she saw Laumec, she came out to him, not too steadily, on feet that staggered.

She was still laughing foolishly, and her trade

was writ very big upon her, when she looked up, and saw who he was.

‘You!’ she said, and stopped.

He stared at her, without answering ; trying, perhaps, to see in her something,—anything,—left from the days when Marie Gouäs had been the prettiest, if the wildest, girl in all the Clos-Poulet. And she, staring back at him, saw the disgust growing in his face, and was stung by it into treating him as she had never meant, she swore to herself with bitterness, never meant, to do. But since he looked at her like that—

‘*V’la, mon gars !*’ she said hoarsely, slapping him on the shoulders and steadying herself with a clutching hand upon his arm ; ‘back again once more, and it is La Goutte who bids you welcome . . . Aha ! La Goutte, and not your stupid little wife, my boy ; La Goutte is worth all the wives in the world, all the whitefaced, mincing, imbeciles of wives ! . . . what fools you men are, to take such women when you can get others for the asking,—and then, *sut !*—oh, *là là*, what fools you men are !’

Laumec, who was never very ready with his words, said nothing, but he tried, not very gently, to loosen her fingers from his arm.

‘Come on!’ she said again; ‘the brandy’s good,—come on and have a *mique*, or a *café à trois couleurs* if you like; and then,—come on, *mon gosse*, for the sake of old times, and let the little white imp go hang.’

He swept her from him with a loud oath, and La Goutte staggered backwards and fell,—fell heavily, while a cart that dashed through the Grand’ Porte, with a great rattling of wheels and jingling of bells, pulled up suddenly. There was an immediate shouting and crowding, a quick increasing commotion; but Laumec did not pause to look back. If La Goutte had fallen, he said to himself, it was her own fault, not his; it was only because she was not sober . . . *dame!* one was certainly free to shake off such as . . . she; and of course nothing serious had happened, nothing, he was quite sure of that. Yet nevertheless that haunting uneasiness lay heavily on him, and he found himself thinking of days

when Marie Gouäs had been different, indeed, from *that*.

He made his way quickly along the winding streets, barely responding to those who greeted him, and they were many. His big deep set eyes were sullen with a mixture of feelings; the gladness of home-coming was quenched, and a dull unfamiliar irritation consumed him. He did not know what it meant, did not understand himself; he only knew that he felt as if trouble were nearing him and would take him unawares; and dimly, he felt the touch of La Goutte upon his arm as an uncleanly thing to take home with him to 'Poldine. Yet when the Rue du Cheval Blanc sloped down behind him, and he passed the House of the Princess and its tower, to enter the tiny court beyond, he forgot everything but the nearness of his three weeks' wife, and when she met him in the darkness of the stair, where he could only feel her in his arms, without seeing her, there was nothing, no, nothing, that at that moment could lessen his content. But presently, when he had time to look about him, the

intolerable sense of evil came back, and the thought with it, of Marie Gouäs.

'Poldine set her chair by the great yawning hearth, where the tiny fire crackled and spluttered in the midst of the handful of bricks, and the soup bubbled in the pot hanging above.

'You will be hungry, and everything is ready,' she said cheerfully, with a careful glance about the room, which was spotless in its orderliness and trim perfection. On the table, beside Laumec, a little linen cloth was spread, and on it was a bowl with quaint gaily-coloured Breton figures, and a big polished wooden spoon lying at the side; there was bread on a tile platter, and cider in a jug, and both jug and drinking-cup were bright with stiff gaudy figures, like the *écuelle* for the soup. There was a plateful of meat and salad; a small dish piled high with little yellow grapes, that glowed as if filled with golden cider; and there was even a china vase, gay with scarlet and gold, and in it a tight, ungraceful knot of monthly roses and lavender.

Laumec surveyed it all with a gloomy admiration.

‘*Mais*—it is too fine,’ he said, awkwardly : ‘it suits you, ’Poldine, but me . . . I am not used to such things. *Ça m’fait b’en peur*—’

She laughed with a rich satisfaction and enjoyment.

‘But you must—*il faut bien !*’ she said, radiantly. ‘It is how one lives, when one can afford it, if one is respectable. It is how I live, *mon homme* ; and when you are at home, it is how you must live also.’

She filled the bowl from the pot of soup simmering over the fire, and sat down opposite to watch him eating, with an absolute content.

She was exceedingly fond of him ; but she was not in the least degree blind to the difference that lay between him and herself—a gulf the more fathomless in that it was so narrow. It was the difference between the *paysan* and the *bourgeoise*, between the fisherman and the *ouvrière* : a chasm not easy to bridge over, and which she had neither the wish nor the intention

so to bridge. She knew very well that it had been her fair smooth skin, her trim dress, her spotless cleanliness, and fine linen that had first caught Laumec's fancy, and then his heart ; she knew that to him she was set upon a pedestal, and that he looked up to her as something better, cleaner, finer, than the women he had had to do with. It was that knowledge that had made her pardon the grimy poverty of the cabin, which was all the home of the *Le Braz de Kerminihi* ; and Laumec's despairing perception of the contrast had drawn her love closer towards him.

During his absence her greatest pleasure had been to cleanse and beautify her room in the *Clos à la Dame*, till a single spot of dust on its spotless floor and walls would have been an offence to her ; and all her small luxuries were chosen so that they might the more dazzle Laumec on his return. She had thought so often of this, his first meal, after the long months spent in the dirty cabin of the *goëlette* ; she had thought out every detail of it, as another woman

might have planned the perfection of her first dinner-party. What a world of trouble she had spent on the choosing of the *écuelle*, the jug, and cider-cup, in Breton faiënce, seeking those figures which she thought would please him best, the biniou-player, the woman spinning, who wore a coiffe like his mother, the fisherman who had his own black hair and broad shoulders; and then the vase, which must be as gay as green and red and gold could make it, the big yellow spoon, the grapes, and, above all, the little spotless linen cloth. 'Poldine had looked at those two little cloths which lay in the drawer of the *armaïne* every night before she went to bed; her mother had tremblingly protested against such a waste of sous, but to her they had seemed the fine florescence of her superiority, the last and visible sign of the white and dainty cleanliness which she loved in herself, and which had won Laumec to love her also.

And now she sat opposite to him, too happy to be garrulous, too serenely conscious of her desirableness to see the shadow that lay upon

him ; her eyes wandered proudly about the room, about the small decorations that meant so much to her. She glanced over the gaudy little pictures that were pinned all along the walls, the mantel-shelf, with its shells and seaweeds, its faded photographs and memorial-cards, its tall crucifix and Virgin ; then she surveyed the spotless floor, and the whiteness of the beds and curtains, with an eye eager to perceive dust. But continually she returned to the table set with the gay Breton faiënce, the flowers in the red and golden vase, and the little linen cloth, all sparkling in the pale bright sunshine from the western window. The completing touch in it all, was the fulfilment of the contrast between herself and this, her fit surrounding, and the rough-clad, storm-worn sailor, who looked so big and black in the midst of the white cleanliness about him.

‘It is how you will live, too, Laumec, when you are at home,’ she repeated, with a broad smile of appreciation and patronage.

He was too busy to answer her ; indeed, a

certain shyness of her made talking at first difficult. The three short weeks of marriage, before he went away, had passed too quickly for the novelty and strangeness to wear off: there had been no time to think of new ways, new habits. Now he found himself treating her with an odd respectful hesitation, since she was there, face to face with him, and no longer the unseen wife whom he had clasped in his arms on the staircase; he remembered, half-surprisedly, that all the months while he had been away, alone with his comrades, she was his wife, here, at home; that others had called her daily by his name, and that she had grown used to knowing that she belonged to him. But he could not help feeling himself as in some sort a stranger and an intruder in this beautiful white room, and the very warmth of her welcoming increased his vague discomfort.

He lifted the *écuelle* on to his knee carefully, fearing to drop the bowl which struck him as so fine, yet loath to eat over the cloth which

frightened him in its spotlessness; till a drop of soup falling suddenly on the hearth made him jump guiltily and sent 'Poldine upon her knees to wipe it up. He found it a difficult meal, with his wife sitting opposite to him in a radiant silence; and a half-smothered desire grew in him for the simple, noisier comfort to which he was used.

'She is a *bourgeoise* — a *bourgeoise* —' he said to himself respectfully, as he might have called her a princess; but, he knew very well that he himself was only a *paysan* and a Terreneuvas, and so much cleanliness and superiority frightened him. He was infinitely proud of his wife, as proud as he was fond, for the two feelings had grown up in him together; but deep down in his heart, along with the sense of coming evil and the thought of Maria Gouäs, there was a growing conviction that it would be difficult and rather terrible if he must always, always, live like this, . . .

He sighed, and then wondered if she had

noticed it. Any way, it was ridiculous to sit silent opposite one's wife.

'It is very hot,' he said lamely. 'Ouf! it is like summer.' 'Poldine smiled at him and crossed her hands in her lap.

'It is good weather, for the time of year; yes, on the whole, it is good weather. But like summer? Oh—no, Laumec; it is not in the least like summer. The bathing is over and the villas are all empty, there is no one going about and nothing to look at. . . . And in summer the sun is like a fire, a white fire, and it burns.'

He shook his head regretfully.

'I suppose I do not remember; it is so long ago, *dame!* since I saw a summer in France. I was only a little fellow, *un tout petit gosse*, and it will seem very strange when I am too old and have to stay at home. Yes, it will feel like another country that I do not know. But, then, it may never happen; there are always some of us who do not come back—' he said resignedly.

'Poldine looked at him with a little more colour than usual in her cheeks. 'It is very foolish to talk like that; it is wicked, and it is unlucky,' she said, putting her hand into her pocket, where something chinked at her touch. 'And moreover it is unkind. It is your business to come home, you owe it to me, who have made everything so comfortable for you here; yes, you owe it to me, and it is your business to see that you return safe, and that Our Lady takes care of you. But how can you expect her to trouble herself if you talk like that?' she said, drawing her hand out of her pocket with a small white chaplet in it.

Laumec opened his mouth to answer, but she silenced him with a wave of her hand.

'No, don't speak,' she went on—'I will see to it—"*Je vous salue, Marie*"—this time; but you must be sure not to do it again, for it is wicked—"et à l'heure de notre mort"—and besides it is unlucky. I think a dizaine will do—"ainsi soit il." There! have you done

with the things? Then I will put them away and sweep the floor, for you have brought so much dust in with you; you must always wipe your feet, Laumec, and leave your sabots here, just at the corner of the door, as mother and I do."

He looked back over his shoulder from the window where he had betaken himself.

'Ah, yes, the mother'—he said—'she is not here. But I suppose she is not ill?'

'Poldine smiled, with the air of observing that her mother would not dream of being so troublesome, and leant upon her broom to answer.

'She has gone to see our cousin, across the water, the one that married Hugôt, the baker. . . . I sent her. I thought it would be nicer to be alone for a day or two; till you got used to things.'

There was something in her glance about the room, which completed her sentence; till he got used—to all these refinements, these luxuries; for he is only a poor rough sailor,

and even her timid foolish old mother might laugh at him. . . . Laumec understood, with one of those quick perceptive instincts that some men have, and he resented it. He almost wished the old woman had been there, it would have been easier. It was very absurd, but he did not know what to talk about; he could not treat 'Poldine as if she were still his sweetheart, for that was against all the conventions of his class or of hers; and he could not talk to her, as he might to a stranger, of the things he had seen and done while he was away. And yet he could not quite command the accustomed familiarity of a husband, either, for her clean superiority frightened, even while it delighted him: he felt rather as if some white and shining angel had stepped into his life, disturbing its habitudes, and he was dazzled, and uncomfortably proud, and perhaps a little unreasonably angry. Yet in spite of it, he could not look at her without a gratified tenderness rising warmly within him; after

all, these were small things that troubled him, and his love for her lay beyond and behind them, untouched. As she came near him, he put an arm round her awkwardly, and recovered some of his courage when he found that she did not resent it.

‘It’s odd!’ he said, with a hesitating laugh. ‘How much afraid I am of you, ’Poldine. I think I had forgotten what it was like to have a wife: it was for such a little, little while, you know. . . . I have been thinking of you as the girl that I held on the ‘*cheval de bois*’ down at the Grand’ Porte, the little red horse with the yellow spots that you always liked best, don’t you remember. And all the time, at home here, you were my wife, and you have got quite used to it. It is very strange, *dame!* to have almost forgotten, and then to come home, and find you—like this.’

He looked down upon her very lovingly: there were things that ’Poldine had not told him in her letters: perhaps she, too, had felt a certain strangeness lying between them.

‘And then, too—’ he went on more slowly,

‘I always knew you were too good for me: and to come, me, a poor rough fisherman, into such a room as this,’ he said with respect. ‘And to look at you and tell myself that I am not dreaming, and that you are really my wife—why, *dame*! it’s difficult, ’Poldine.’

She looked at him with a contented amusement: it was very well that he should feel like that. The one thing that she could not have forgiven him was that he should not see how much better she was than he.

‘Oh, you will get used to it all,’ she said, with a touch of patronage in her smile. ‘You will very soon get used to it—and it is really a great deal more comfortable to have things nice, and quite easy, when one understands. Only you must be sure to remember about wiping your feet, and to leave your sabots there—and to put things back in their places and all that. Oh, it is really quite simple, when one is used to it, *voyons*!’

His arm dropped from her waist and he sighed, with a little rueful glance about him.

‘I don’t suppose I’ll remember, but I’ll try,—’ he said. ‘And I think I’ll go and see my mother, ’Poldine, if you don’t want me.’

She drew away from him instantly, but answered with none the less kindness and a serene consciousness of well-doing.

‘Oh, yes—I suppose you—*ought*,’ she said. ‘Only you needn’t stay long, and then later, we can go out.’

He went down the stair slowly, feeling his way in the darkness, and telling himself with a grim amusement, that he was still a stranger here: then stood for a moment in the little court below, overcome by many feelings that he could not have put into words. There was, before all, an immense admiration and reverence for ’Poldine, and a pride—an immeasurable pride—in the possession of her; there was also a very quick tenderness and an intimate delight in the thought of her condition. But he found himself in the midst of refinements that he had forgotten, or that in the short, hurried, excited weeks before he left, had been set aside;

and a sense as of a heavy burden lay upon him. when he realized that this was now to be his way of life. It was very fine, very beautiful, and very fit for 'Poldine's white hands and soft skin ; but for him—well ! it would be difficult, only he must remember, and he must learn. When one had such a wife, *dame !* something was expected of one.

And Laumec took up the burden of it very seriously, very honestly ; he was not good enough for 'Poldine, but he would do what he could to please her—only, it would be *diantrement* difficult. Perhaps it was just as well that his wife did not see all his thoughts just then ; for behind all his love for her, all his pride in her, there was an obstinate remembrance of a little room that had been the home of Marie Gouäs, a little room where nothing was too fine, and where he had been very much at his ease ; a poor, common, dirty little room, but where he had felt less of an intruder than in the midst of all that trim whiteness up yonder, *chez* 'Poldine.

'Poor Marie—' but the memory of what she was now came over him again, and with

it, that strange expectation of trouble. . . . He hoped she had not been hurt in falling ; though it was certainly not his fault. But she must never touch him again—he did not want even to see her again ; for after all, long ago, when he had been a hot-blooded boy, he had loved Marie Gouäs—and she had left him. Laumec never forgave, once he was thoroughly angered : the priest told him it was a sin, but he only dropped his eyes and said nothing. Men that forgave ill deeds were poor soft folk, not worthy of their manhood ; it was only women that should forgive, it was part of their nature. So he did not want even to see La Goutte, since it made him remember everything, and, though he was sorry for her, he still had not forgiven.

But it was hard that something—he did not know what—had taken all the brightness out of his homecoming : and that nothing was quite as he had expected it to be, even his wife—though she was only too good, only too fine, for such as he ; a princess, a . . . *bourgeoise*, and so very very different from himself.

‘No one else has a wife like her,’ he said gratefully. ‘When one is in her room, it is like being in church, it is so clean and white and sweet. And she is so good—besides, if it is very hard to live always like that, there is the cabin, and Mic’ and the mother.’

CHAPTER III

LAUMEC was on his way homeward, after a short half-hour in the old cabin, where, somehow or another, and without much help from any one, he had grown up till he was old enough to be sent off as a 'mousse' on board one of the Terreneuvas' goëlettes. He had gone younger than most, having successfully dodged the regulations that forbade any such engagements of children under twelve: a fine mendacity and an accident of growth secured him a berth when he was barely ten. This gave him, when he remembered it, a startling sense of having lived longer than others; he had been away at the Banks so often already during all these years, that, when he counted up his voyages, he felt strangely old; but the winters he had spent hanging about the old cabin, which leant

its rotten timbers lovingly against the big brick chimney which was its main support and stay. Inside, there was room to sleep, and, if need be, to eat, though at all times with crowding ; one had to live one's life, even in winter, in the open air. There Madame Le Braz had her tiny charcoal stove, a chair or two less safe as seats than an old tree trunk that lay along the cabin front, and a heap of dirty rags, which she called her washing ; there was her living-room, her parlour, and there formerly had stood the cradle with its perennial baby. Passers-by on the high road sometimes wondered, when they looked at the astonishing collection of broken chairs and tables, of potsherds and rags, how her possessions came to be so numerous and so worthless ; but old women shook their heads solemnly, and explained the matter with lifting eyebrows.

‘ It was all good enough—old, but not to be ashamed of—when they came ; but when one drinks, and when one kicks things here and there, and when one lives in a *tapage*—and particularly when one is wicked enough to have ten or twelve

or twenty children—*des garso'illes plein les lèts*—what can one expect: *C'est une sale cochonnerie, va !*'

But Laumec had grown up amongst it all, and, by long custom, was blind to all its shortcomings; it was only to him the old place which was home, where he could do what he liked, and where he and Mic', in spite of blows from their father and scolding from their mother, and more or less ill usage from their elder brothers, had been happy enough together. It was where he had been born; he had no memory of finer things, or of a place where the name of Le Braz de Kerminihi had been held in any sort of honour; he scarcely remembered even the two sisters that had gone away to the convent, where they were to be taught, and where some day they would take the veil. For, as it had been explained to them, since there was no *dot*: what else could they do? It was the only way the honour of the name could be saved; the sons might work—might starve, if it so pleased them: but the family would see that the daughters of

the Le Braz were . . . provided for . . . And so they had gone away, the two little girls, together ; and together had faded out of this life. For if they still lived, it was as cloistered sisters, and to Laumec they were dead. Their places had soon been filled up in the cabin, where they had left not even a recollection ; it was to the boys, the boys who might work or were free, if they so chose, to starve, the boys who were allowed to live their lives according to their liking, that the hut was home. And being so, Laumec left it, just now, half regretfully, glancing back at the low sunshine beating all about it, and oppressed by an underlying remembrance of the fine uncomfortable gentility of 'Poldine's room, yonder, in the Clos à la Dame, where now it would be his duty—and he told himself seriously, his privilege—to live. Yet his feet did not take him that way very fast ; he mounted the stair-like street of the White Horse slowly, and paused to look back, when he reached the House of the Princess, to see who was coming behind him with such hurried steps. Perhaps, something—

that odd sense in us which foresees trouble, and which had weighed upon him since he had come home—told him to wait now, for there was news on its way that concerned him.

It was a boy, running, who slackened his pace as he drew near and eyed Laumec, from under his overhanging red *berêt*, doubtfully.

‘Are you Laumec Le Braz?’ he said shrilly, finding his breath. ‘They said he would be dressed like a sailor and very big and black, and with a *tête de brette*—’

The other took the lad by the ear, and twisted it.

‘Keep a civil tongue in your head, *sale Normand!*’ he growled, angrily. ‘What do you want with me?’

The boy jerked himself free and retreated a pace or two; he delivered his message at the pitch of his voice, in a nasal monotone.

‘It’s La Goutte,—she’s dying, and I’ve been for the priest, Monsieur Picardôt is going because the Curé’s ill; comes of eating *maigre*, they say, and he’s got colic, she wants to see you

first, so you'll have to go quick, if you are to be in time. And I was to tell you that it's in the Rue des Bois, in the cellar under the big house, No. 28, the one they call the *Château des Pervenches*,—the cellar at the back, the dark one.'

He went up a side alley, a narrow steep passage with an open gutter running down the middle of it, keeping an eye on Laumec, who stood staring after him in a dazed silence. When he reached the top, he paused, ready for instant flight, and stuck his hands into the pockets of his blue cotton knickerbockers, his black over-blouse flapping round him like a petticoat belted beneath his arms. Then he hurled a kick into the air, and laughed shrilly.

*'Du fil carré, du fil pointu,
Vieux cochon de Breton, tu pues
Une anni guse . . .'*

—he sang, and then, as Laumec started towards him, he fled. Laumec swore for a time with conviction; for the old rancour between Norman and Breton was strong enough, even in the

midst of other trouble, to sting him unbearably ; and for the moment, the thing he wanted most in the world, was to catch that boy and thrash him. But he knew better than to give chase through those tangled lanes and alleys, which to him, who had not actually lived within them, were only half familiar. And besides, there was not time.

He strode back down the Rue du Cheval Blanc, thinking very little, except that there was no time to lose, no time,—since they had sent already for the priest.

He went through the streets at the full stretch of his legs ; there were people coming and going, men and women standing idly at their doors, or leaning out of many tiers of windows, and a high flame of sunshine overhead, lighting the topmost panes, but leaving all the rest in shadow. Above, upon the right, the flying buttresses of the church lifted themselves against the sky, a rim of sun gilding their gargoyles and their mouldings ; and over all, like a guiding, beckoning finger, the white spire raised itself, slender and shining, into

the great width of blue and gold. But down below it was sombre and a little chilly, already almost dark ; and Laumec sped along the street, with eyes that saw nothing, and through the confused sense of trouble lying heavy upon him, the one thought that he must be quick, or there would be no time.

In the Rue des Bois, the old houses leant confidingly together, as if whispering some ancient gossip, their lower stones retreating into deep dark shadows; but the street looked towards the sunset and a low gleam came down it, colouring the woodwork that was worn to a velvety surface with tawny streaks and stains of orange and black. It lit, too, a hundred tapers in the innumerable panes of glass that built up the wide frontages of each storey ; it fell on faded gaudy shawls and mats hanging in the yawning black archways of the old clothes shops ; on green and orange pottery and bronze two-handled jars set out upon the steps in rows ; and glittered here and there on the zinc basins and pipes descending from every window, and on the

open gutter running down the middle of the street. Half way up, the 'Château des Pervenches' reared its high projecting gables, its golden-brown panellings, and its overlapping window-panes, in front of a small side alley, down which it seemed, in one's fancy, to bend and peer ; and there,—in the great old rooms on the second floor, where once a dying woman had longed for them, came every Easter Eve, it was said, a miraculous growth of the blue *pervenche* ; a broad blue carpet, that looked like a fallen stretch of sky . . . only to fade and wither as soon as the Easter bells rang out from the white church steeple. And though the old house had fallen from its great estate, it kept in its decay a touch of mystery and majesty that made it wear not ungracefully the name that the neighbours had given to it ; a name which it would not lose so long as the strange blue flowers paid their short swift Easter visit, or until the timbers fell in and the glass panes were shattered, and the Château des Pervenches was no more than a heap of dead and rotting rubbish. But

underneath,—down a spiral stair that was as black as pitch, with greasy walls and worn uneven steps, there were cellars; and Laumec felt his way cautiously towards the glimmer of light, murmuring again to himself what the boy had said for his guidance; ‘the cellar to the back,—the dark one.’

The room, if it could be called a room, was lit very feebly by a taper and a small dim lamp; the walls were humid, the floor of trodden earth, with sudden rough projections of rock. There was no furniture but a rude chest, a long coffin-like thing, such as the Terreneuvas take away with them, black with dirt and usage: and a bed in the corner, which was little more than a heap of straw and a few rags thrown upon some planks. The air was cold and damp, and yet heavy with human exhalations; for a knot of women crowded round the bed, and many others stood about in the shadows, whispering and watching with the suppressed excitement that death provokes about itself. Laumec hesitated at the door, but he felt himself

pushed forward, and stammered an incoherent question, his voice hoarse and uncertain: an old woman, her head tied up in a handkerchief, answered him briskly, and with an unrestrained cheerfulness.

‘The doctor’s gone, he said there was no use in his staying—there was no more to be done. And the priest will be here in a minute. But she’s almost past understanding—she’ll not know you after all.’

And eyeing the figure on the bed, lying now so quietly under a tattered coverlet, she added thoughtfully—

‘A pity we sent for you, as it has turned out; but she was so wild and noisy, and nothing else would satisfy her . . . *tout de même*, it’s a pity.’

He came to the side of the bed and looked down upon it also; then, with a sudden impulse, he pulled off his cap and dropped on to his knees beside it. He wished it was not too late: he wished he could have spoken to her—once more.

‘What—how was it?’ he asked presently, of the old woman beside him. She moved her head and an accompanying eyebrow in an oddly suggestive silence.

‘She fell—’ she said, after a while. ‘She was not sober, and there was a cart. Oh, it is astonishing it has not happened sooner. She has *le corps en bouillie—oui, tant que ça*; and then, with her life—oh là, là, *pour la misère c’est la misère*—’ she paused, with a little gasp of frightened surprise; for slowly, steadily, a change had come over the face of the woman on the bed, and now she looked at Laumec. But it was the eyes of Marie Gouäs, it seemed to him, poor pretty wild Marie Gouäs, that looked at him out of the abominable mask that was La Goutte.

Laumec shuddered, as if those dim eyes accused him.

‘Not you—Marie—not you; I did not mean it!’ he cried, with a sudden despairing sense of guilt upon him, and a longing for confession:—‘I only—I could not help it—Marie, if you

had looked at me like that, I would not have thrust you off. But you know I did not mean—' and with a sudden short sob, he hid his face in his hands. It was very terrible to him to think that through him death had come to Marie Gouäs; and he remembered miserably how he had loved her, once, not so very long ago.

A flash of life swept across her face in a ripple of colour and emotion, and her lips fell apart gaspingly. She remembered what she had meant to do; he had been cruel perhaps, but she would save him from any risk of trouble, would save him, because of old times; and then, besides, she had a legacy for him, one that would make the little white wife unhappy. She laughed a little, very feebly; as if the mere thought of it brought her back for a moment from the brink of death. But there was no time to lose; she must be quick.

'Listen!' she said, with a great effort to speak clearly. 'It was—my fault altogether; no one—no one, I tell you! made me fall; I had been drinking—and I—fell myself. I could not—'

keep my—feet I remember it—all; and if trouble comes of—it, you have heard—me say that it was my—fault; not his—not anyone's—'

She stopped and gasped awhile for breath, while a whisper ran busily about the room amongst the listening women. That she should speak to them, after being seemingly dead, kept them quiet and awestruck.

'But—there is—the child,' she said presently, to Laumec.

He raised his head and looked at her confusedly.

'Your child,—' she added, with increasing difficulty. 'You never saw—it, but you—must remember. You know he is—yours; and he is like—you—'

There was another pause; he could hear the gasping sobs with which she drew her breath, the small rustling of women in the room or on the stair, and far away, in the street, the nearing sound of a bell, ringing solemnly and unceasingly.

She raised herself on one elbow, her face

distorted with the effort, and laid a cold wet hand on Laumec's.

‘The child’—she said distinctly. ‘You must take him—you must—whatever your wife says. He is your son—swear that you will take him with you—quick!’

He did as she bid him, with a quick desire to pacify her; in a dull bewildered acquiescence. Then she sank back, with a gasp and a long rattle in her throat.

‘It don't matter—for the priest,’ she muttered. ‘I've done what I wanted—for the sake of old—times. And you mayn't believe—it, but I liked—you—best.’

She paused again; the bell was very near now and she seemed to listen to it.

‘But there's—the child,’ she said suddenly and very clearly. ‘You've sworn—and the little white—wife—may go hang.’

Something passed across her face like a ripple of laughter, and her head fell over on to her shoulder, so that she looked once more at Laumec, with a strange insolent mockery.

Outside, the bell stopped and the chanting began; in the room, the women fell on their knees; but still she looked at Laumec and laughed. The priest might come and touch her with his sacred oils; but she had not waited for him, she had gone, just as she was, La Goutte—

.

'Poldine waited at her window where she could look down on to the little court below, till beneath her all was in shadow, and here and there about the town she caught the sudden twinkle of a lamp. Up above it was yet light, with the shining dusk that lingers after a clear and golden sunset; and the air was still with that pause that comes before the falling of night. All the sounds that arise from the town were refined and attenuated, as if they came from a great distance, yet were marvellously clear; the working day was over, and there seemed to be a breeze of laughter coming up from the streets. There were the shrill cries of women and the

shouts of children ; the jingling bells on passing horses and the whistle of the steam tramway outside the walls. There was the church clock striking the quarters and the hours ; the *raccmodeur* still a foot, with his long monotonous cry :— ‘ *V’la le r-r-r-ac-comodeur—!* ’ and the women who walked heavily under their baskets seeking for rags and rubbish, their high plaintive voices chanting from every quarter of the town,— ‘ *des guerchôts à vendre ? Par-r-r-là, mesdames !* ’ Yet the whole was so blent into a medley of small sounds, that the result seemed to be silence . . . or the sense of silence, which is another name for peace.

’Poldine was deaf to the silence, and heard only many familiar noises, without the one for which she listened, the sound of Laumec’s foot. She sighed a little as she came back into the room and lit her little lamp ; he must have had much to say to his mother, more, surely, than to her—but nevertheless presently he would be here, and then he would not leave her again.

She brightened and flushed till her face grew radiant, and she moved about the room, tidying its perfect order and dusting its spotless surfaces. She had a great desire to make it something better still, that he might have the more pleasure in it: for if she wished him to see and comprehend her fine superiority, it was after all because she perceived it to be that, that he had first loved in her. She laid the table ready for their evening meal, bringing out with a proud smile, all the little adornments she had gathered together during the long lonely summer; the white cloth, the gay Breton pottery, the gaudy vase with its nosegay. She stirred the tiny fire till it spluttered and crackled cheerily; the evenings were chilly now, and Laumec might be cold. She set his chair—the big armchair which had been bought specially for him, with the bright-coloured cushion she had made for it by sewing at odd moments—she set it ready for him upon the hearth; then she went again to the window, which was still lit by the dusky saffron glare

of the fading sky, and leaning out, she listened for his steps in the court below. She sighed again a little impatiently; she scarcely allowed herself to say it, but surely it was hard that he should stay so long in that miserable hut, when he had barely seen her yet, and she was waiting for him, here, where everything was so different. Presently she drew her head in and closed the window, with a little decided movement of her hands; there was a curve about her lips that would have been anger in a woman who kept less count of all her feelings than 'Poldine. But she recognised inwardly that she had cause to be angry, and had thereby the satisfaction of feeling herself above it.

Suddenly she paused, as a sound caught her ear; going to the door, she opened it wide, and let a broad patch of light shine out on to the dark staircase.

'Laumec! is it you?' she cried, her high voice echoing amongst the old timbers and stonework.

'*Oui, oui, ma fille—*' came up from below,

accompanied by the tramp of heavy footsteps, and a curious plaintive whimpering that made 'Poldine stare wonderingly into the darkness. 'I have been very long. I know it; but it was not my fault, no. I will explain—.'

She smiled to herself; of course, he had been kept by something; otherwise, he would assuredly have come home, long ago, seeing it was to such a home, and to her—but she wondered very much what that noise was. It was like a child, or a young dog, but Laumec would not surely be so foolish.

'Is it a dog that whimpers like that?' she said cheerfully, for the stair was long and steep, and quite dark, and she could only hear, not see him yet. 'Kick it, so that it will not follow you. I will not have a dog bringing dirt here, *voyons donc!* Kick it, and then it will go away.'

There was a moment's silence, as if Laumec had paused, and had somehow checked the little fretful whimper. Then he came on again, without answering, and now he drew nearer.

'Poldine stepped back, so that the light fell

full upon him, and she uttered a quick astonished sound as he reached the landing; he looked strangely tired and white under his bronzing, and he carried in his arms a little child, that blinked confusedly in the sudden glare. Shuffling off his sabots at the door, he went straight across to the hearth, where he set the child down upon the rug; and stood a moment, looking at it thoughtfully. Then he turned to 'Poldine, and a sudden smile made his face and eyes radiant and tender.

‘It is good to come—home!’ he said.

This seemed to be his real homecoming; this, with the waif that belonged to him upon his arm, the waif that was only his, and the release from a dull shameful misery that was fast dropping back from him into forgetfulness. La Goutte, the cellar, his own sense of guilt, like the *goëlette* and the fogs, had all been left behind, had been escaped from; he only felt the warmth, and the brightness, and the comfort, not of the fire or the room, but of his wife, his love for her, his confidence. If she had been

other than she was, he might have doubted or hesitated ; but knowing her, he brought himself and his child back to her with a deep and grateful certainty of her welcome, and a conviction, at last, that this was home.

And 'Poldine did not, at present, seem to be very much surprised : perhaps she was too content with Laumec's contentment to think as yet greatly of anything else. She had been satisfied with the mere sight of him earlier in the day ; now she perceived that there had been something wanting, which was wanting no longer. Yet she cast an inquiring eye upon the child, who was gazing at the fire sleepily, with bright eyes blinking under a shock of black hair. He was dirty, he was ragged, and he offended her instinctively ; yet he was a pretty boy, and strangely like some one, with a likeness that evaded her.

Laumec followed her glance, and sought for the best words in which to tell his story ; but being a man of simple speech, he found nothing to say but the bare truth.

'It is—he is—my son, 'Poldine,' he said, with

a sudden flush, but looking at her honestly. 'I did not—know, till to-day. And now he has no . . . mother,' he went on with a stammer, 'and I have brought him to you. Poor little devil, there is no one else to look after him.'

'Poldine sat down, and crossed her hands in her lap.

'I don't understand, *pour sûr*,' she said, tranquilly. 'It is very stupid, perhaps, but—you are going to explain, I suppose?'

Laumec nodded slowly, and paused, as if to find words.

'It was this way—' he began. Then he told her, laboriously, but very simply, of his meeting earlier in the day with La Goutte, who had wished him to drink with her; of the rough, impatient jerk with which he had freed himself from her, and her fall.

'I did not mean it—' he explained. 'I had no idea she was hurt. But there was the cart: and—she need not have fallen, even if I did push her away; I could not bear to come to you with the touch of her on my arm.'

Then he went on to tell her of the message that had been brought to him, of his going to the cellar and of La Goutte's death.

'She sent for me—' he said, and his voice trembled ; in going over it again, he revived his own emotion. Laumec felt things upon the surface very vividly : he was moved as easily as he forgot. There were those, therefore, who thought him affectionate, soft, and changeable ; but these were as much external things to him as his clothes. He would presently forget La Goutte ; but he would never forget, nor forgive, Marie Gouäs.

'She sent for me,' he said, 'because she thought I was in danger ; she sent for me, to say before them all that it was not my fault. You understand, I might have been blamed—' he paused, and, under the semicircle of his falling brows, his eyes were moist.

'Poldine nodded. 'Yes—it was really quite right of her,' she said, critically. So far, it was all very reasonable, though, perhaps, a little unpleasant, seeing what the woman had been.

‘Then—she told me of—the child,’ Laumec went on, with some embarrassment. ‘You see, I had not known, or at least, I had heard nothing about it—it was all so long ago, four years—five years—I had almost forgotten. And La Goutte was so different from . . . Marie Gouäs,’ he added in a lower voice.

His wife said nothing.

‘She made me promise that I would bring him home with me,’ he said presently: ‘that I would keep him—of course, it was only right, and I would have done it any way. The poor little devil has none but me—and you, ‘Poldine,’ he added, stretching out his hand to the child, who was crooning contentedly to himself, half-asleep in the warmth of the fire, and turning his face to the lamplight. ‘Any one can see he is my son,’ Laumec said, with an awkward gratification.

‘Poldine lifted her chin expressively.

‘He has the eyes of . . . , La Goutte,’ she remarked, after a pause. She sat with her hands folded in her lap, her face calm, her brow un-

ruffled ; only that small curve about her lips, which would have been anger in another woman, but in 'Poldine was—what ? She liked to say of herself, that she never lost her temper. At this moment, she found it consoling to reflect that any one else would have been furious, but she was quite calm—and reasonable—yes, that was it, reasonable. She looked up and met Laumec's eyes pleasantly, thrilling with satisfaction at the warm tenderness that shone in them.

'He knows me—he sees how different I am to others,' she said to herself, triumphantly. 'How his mother would have sworn and scolded, and made a *tapage*—' And then she asked him with great cheerfulness:—

'So then, what are you going to do with—the child ?'

Her husband lifted his eyebrows,—they came down at either side of his face almost to his cheeks — and stared at her, perplexedly.

'But, *mo' fill*'—I have brought him to you,' he

explained. 'Poldine tapped the floor with her foot, and then reminded herself that it was only other women that were impatient.

'Oh yes—for to-night,' she said, with some reluctance. 'It cannot be helped, and I would never be unkind. You need not take him away to night, perhaps. But to-morrow—?'

Laumec still looked at her in astonishment.

'*Mais*—I brought him to you,' he repeated, speaking slowly, and with an elaborate distinctness. He did not know what was the matter with 'Poldine, who was so quick and clever; it must be his fault, he had not explained properly. 'He has no mother, and he is my son. So you see, he must live with us, of course; where else could he go? And you will be so good to him that he will love you so much. You are good to every one, 'Poldine.'

He stretched out his hand and laid it caressingly upon her arm.

His wife smiled a little; she was not at all angry, only amused, men did not understand. She must explain, just once for all, to Laumec,

and then nothing more need be said about it, since it was undeniably disagreeable. Only, he must be made to understand clearly, certainly he must be made to understand.

‘For to-night,’ she said calmly, ‘the child can stay. It is late, and though I do not like it, of course, I will not ask you to take him away to-night. But to-morrow you must find some other place for him—the *asile* would be best; yes, the *asile*. I should not like him to be at your mother’s, where you would be always seeing him; it would not be fair to—to me, and people would talk. But of course you must see for yourself that he cannot remain here,’ she said with a cheerful decisiveness. ‘I do not find any fault with you, I do not blame you about it; it is very disagreeable, but it happened long ago, and men seem to like such things. . . . I do not understand, but it does not concern me. Only, since I am your wife and a person used to being respected, of course I will not have your . . . love child . . . here,’ she said.

Laumec started to his feet, and looked down upon them both; 'Poldine sitting trimly on her chair, with her spotless coiffe and white hands folded in her lap, and the pretty dirty boy sucking his thumb before the fire, the child that he had brought home out of the gutter. He did not care for it particularly, except as a strong man is softened and touched by the smallness and weakness of a little child, and moved in some dim fashion by the mingled likenesses in its face; but the sense of meeting resistance where he had least expected it, pierced him through his outer nature, and reached the deep, turbulent, headstrong self that lay below. It was not anger that he felt—yet; it was rather a measureless resentment. And it rose in proportion as he remembered what his confidence in her had been, and his love.

'You will not keep him,' he said, slowly. 'But you are my wife, and if I say you shall?'

Poldine lifted her eyebrows unconcernedly.

'*Et . . . alors?*' she asked; 'what then?

The room is my own, I live on my own earnings, I am an honest woman; how would you, or any one, make me do such a thing? You do not know what you ask; it is foolish, it is impossible—there is no one who would do it, and certainly not I—*pas moi, toujours!* I shall have children of my own . . . some day,' she added with a little colour in her cheeks, and a glance towards something that stood covered up, in a corner; 'and I must think of them. It would not be proper that they should be brought up with . . . that child. I would not be unkind, no, not to any one; but what you ask is impossible, you see yourself it is impossible, Laumec!'

He drew his eyebrows down above his deep-set angry eyes, and his nostrils quivered and grew white. He was perfectly conscious that all that she said was reasonable enough; she was even, perhaps, quite right—and yet he was not the less angry with her. She had disappointed him, she had deceived him, he said to himself; she was not at all what she

had taught him to think her. He had counted on her kindness, on her welcome for his child, simply because it was his, and because it was young and motherless, and needed a home; he had seen, in his fancy, her face light up with exquisite tenderness, and her hands reach out to gather the boy into her arms. He had pictured her, perhaps, with the sweet gracious pitifulness of the 'bonne Vierge' in the church yonder, her ample motherhood ready to embrace all that came to her; and instead there was this woman who was certainly 'Poldine, and yet so unlike all he had conceived her to be. He could have understood if she had been angry with him; he would have been infinitely repentant and tender if she had cried; but this calm cheerful resistance set up against him, this entirely reasonable obstinacy, was something new, something inconceivable, and the more he recognised that he could in no way compel her, the more intense an anger grew up within him.

'Very well,' he said, quietly enough. 'If

you like, we will say you are free . . . but the child is nevertheless my son. You will have to choose, 'Poldine ; both of us or neither, which is it to be?' He paused, and a sudden impulse made him lean towards her ; she was so small, so fair, so soft, so entirely a woman, and desirable, that he felt she could not possibly refuse him utterly ; it was an unnatural, an unimaginable thing that it should be so. . . . 'It is for my sake, *mo' fill*,' he said, his voice breaking, and breathing fast, as if he were in pain. 'For my sake—do not think of the child, but of me . . . then we will see . . . we could be so happy together ; and all summer I have been thinking of coming home to you. For my sake, 'Poldine.'

She hesitated for just one moment ; his voice and the appeal of his eyes moved her a little, and she wondered why he took it so seriously. Then she remembered that here and now she must decide what the future would be ; not, of course, as to choosing between Laumec and the child, *that* she did not believe in for a moment ;

but if she gave into him now, she would have to do so always. And to give in was difficult always to 'Poldine; impossible now, when she felt herself in the right, and considered herself his superior.

'Of course we will be happy,' she said, looking up at him pleasantly. 'You have a good home, and me to keep it for you, and the *bonne Vierge* is always kind to those that live honestly and have nothing to be ashamed of. But all the same, one must be reasonable, and not even to please you will I have that child here, Laumec. You need not talk nonsense about choosing both of you or neither; it is not as if I were doing anything wrong, or even unkind; no, it is only reasonable and proper that I should refuse such a thing as that, and you should not ask it of me. You see, I have not made a fuss about it at all, and I really do not think I am—unreasonable,' she said, with a little laugh.

Laumec whistled an air somewhat out of tune, and stared about the room. He was conscious of a horrible anger consuming him,

but he had no desire to show it ; since she was so calm and cheerful, he would be the same, if he could. Then he stooped and picked up the child, putting it into the crook of his arm.

‘ Very well,’ he said, with apparent equanimity. ‘ Perhaps you may think better of it to-morrow, and come and tell me so. . . . Good night !’ And he went to the door, opening it with his free hand, and pushing his feet into his sabots, the child on his arm whimpering sleepily, and stretching its hands out to the light.

‘ Poldine rose with a spring to her feet, and her face grew pink.

‘ Laumec !’ she cried. ‘ What folly ! as if the brat were worth all this ! It’s a pity he did not die along with his—’

Her husband turned upon her quickly, and she left the phrase unfinished.

‘ Yes, it was folly,’ he said ; ‘ I was fool enough to think that you were almost an angel, *mo’ fill*’. And after all you are only—’ he paused, and glanced about him with a sudden bitter mocking

—‘a *bourgeoise*, and too fine, much too fine, for me and my son. We are not fit to keep company with the like of you ; no, we are not fit—’

He banged the door after him, and she could hear the tramp of his descending footsteps, mingled with the fretful wail of the child growing fainter and fainter as he went down each flight of stairs. For a moment she trembled violently, and looked towards the window, as if she remembered that from thence she could still call him back ; only a word, and he would hear her down below in the court ; only a word, only to give way in this—. Then she sat down again, and looked about her a while in silence. The whiteness of the beds, the dark polish of the floor, the little pictures, all soothed and consoled her, for she felt that he could not long stay away from her, and from all this. She would wait, would let all this speak for her ; and he would come back when he realised what he was losing. And then, it would be he who would need give way.

‘I am afraid I was angry—at the last,’ she said to herself conscientiously. ‘It was wrong, though it was very natural. But it is he who will think better of it, and will come back—to-morrow; for of course he will see that I am quite right, and that what he wanted was impossible. No one could expect me to take in his . . . love-child, it is not reasonable . . . and I am glad I did not give way’—she said, with conviction.

CHAPTER IV

BUT when to-morrow came, Laumec did not think better of it; he was not a *bas-breton* for nothing. He had many hot moods on the surface, which blew over the quicker for their sudden vivacity; but underneath, beyond the reach of argument or reason, lay the long, strong passions of anger and obstinacy, which not even he himself could bend or cool. He was very gentle in his speech, very kind in his handling of children and all weak or dumb things; yet he had killed a dog that he loved, because it had disobeyed him, and he never forgave an offence save when he had repaid it. And now it did not in the least lessen his resentment that there was very much to be

said in justification of 'Poldine ; even his mother, who generally considered her with a ready criticism, thought that she was right and altogether reasonable, in this.

'You could not expect her to take the boy,' she said loudly, the long hairs about her lip and chin quivering as she spoke : 'it is ridiculous, abominable, to think of it. He is nothing to her, nothing : and with a child of her own near due—'

But this did not make the least difference to Laumec, nor was he softened by it as his mother meant that he should be. He was quite unreasonable ; he was sore, as well as angry, and was the more bitter because he had loved 'Poldine as men of his class do not usually care for their wives. But that was not *this* 'Poldine, but another—the one he had thought her to be.

'I was sure she would do it—would do anything I asked her ; I never doubted,' he said sullenly, in reply to his mother's expostulations. 'And it was all so long ago—the child

was no wrong to *her*. I thought she was so different from other women: I never doubted her—' he repeated.

'*Mais voyons donc, 'cr-r-ré nom!* In her place I would have slapped your face for asking such a thing.'

He nodded, with a flash of amusement in his angry eyes.

'Yes; we would have had a great row, and then . . . you would have done what I wanted.'

His mother's unwieldy figure shook, and her face wrinkled into noiseless laughter.

'But she did not slap my face,' he went on, relapsing into sullenness. 'She did not cry, she did not blame me, she did not make a row; all that I could have understood. She sat with her hands in her lap, and a smile on her mouth, and she was quite calm and good-tempered, and . . . reasonable. She was like a stone, as white and as hard. I thought she was so different; I never doubted her.'

After all, it was that that he could not forgive; that she had set herself up against him, that

she was not what he had fancied her, not what he had expected her to be.

Yesterday had been a day of emotions ; and Laumec resented all emotions that were not pleasant ones, even when it was himself that nursed them. He had felt himself injured unwarrantably by the sense of oppression which had lain heavy upon him and had quenched the first delight of home-coming, and he laid the blame of it unreasonably enough, on 'Poldine's cherished preparations for his comfort. All that she had done, all about her, took on such a distasteful importance now to him, that he almost forgot La Goutte ; it was 'Poldine, 'Poldine's ridiculous gentility, he said to himself, that had spoilt every thing. And yet yesterday, how different it had all seemed to him ; that death-bed had been so horrible, the death-bed of the wretched woman whose very touch he abhorred, and yet whom he had,—innocently enough,—killed, or at least brought to this,—yes, and in more ways than one. He was stunned by the warring of so many feelings within him ; disgust,

regret, pity, and yet that underlying, unlessened resentment against Marie Gouäs, which no suffering of hers, no later pity of his, could do away with ; such things, with Laumec, were for life. And then . . . he had presently hurried homeward with the child,—the child for whom as yet he had no love, nothing but an awkward sense of protection and a commencing paternity ; he had felt as if he were leaving behind him in the dark, a long abominable nightmare, a horror that the mere presence of 'Poldine would at once and entirely dispel. He hurried home, with a great need to be near her, to be safe with her, as a child runs to its mother, as he himself would have gone in his need, to the *bonne Vierge* yonder in the church ; with a certainty of immediate help and consolation, a glad confidence in her abiding graciousness. He did not stop to think whether he were not asking too much of her ; that seemed to him impossible, he was so sure of her willingness to give all and more than he could possibly want. And with the dumb sense of needing comfort, the same that made

him kneel sometimes here in the church, sometimes yonder in the little cabin of the *goëlette* amidst the fogs,—humbly, foolishly, gratefully, he had brought himself and the child home to 'Poldine ; for those few minutes, his love for her had been something almost holy, in its simple unquestioning faith.

And he had found that she was not in the least what he had thought ; only a trim tidy little woman, who smiled horribly when others would have raged or wept, and who was unutterably . . . damnably . . . reasonable.

No, it did not in the least matter to Laumec that she was very possibly in the right ; what concerned him was, that she was not 'Poldine, not his 'Poldine, but a stranger, a woman whom he did not know, and who was yet his wife ; it seemed to him that he had been abominably, odiously, tricked and deceived. And since he could not find words to express all this that he perceived dimly and with difficulty, being no more than a *Terreneuvas* and very ignorant, he turned upon his mother with a sudden fierce

exasperation, when she sought to send him home.

‘I stay here—’ he said, and swore at her. ‘This is my home—I will not live with a fine lady that I do not know.’

His mother stared at him awhile in an unusual silence, and thereafter left him to himself.

In the Clos à la Dame, 'Poldine sat and waited; the little cloth lay on the table, the Breton pottery was put ready, and the flowers were still fresh in the gold and scarlet vase; now and then she got up, and moving hither and thither, brushed off an invisible dust, and set every thing into a more sweet orderliness. But most of the long hours she spent in her chair, with her face turned towards the door, and a smile of welcome lurking about the corners of her mouth; she was sure, quite sure, that he would come, just as soon as he had thought better of it. For her mother, when she came back, she had no explanation, and few words of any sort; she seemed thoughtful and absorbed with herself; but tranquil and un-

disturbed. She took food when it was set before her, got up, or went to bed when it was suggested, but day and night—for she did not seem to sleep—her hands were folded placidly in front of her, her face was calm and bright, and she looked towards the door with a small restrained smile of expectation.

Her mother hovered about her, in a trembling anxiety and bewilderment; neighbours came in sometimes, and whispered of things that might presently happen; but she always answered serenely, if they questioned her, that nothing was wrong.

‘I am quite well, exceedingly well,’ she said. ‘There is nothing but what is proper and reasonable. I am quite well, only I am waiting.’

But her mother begged the neighbours to sit with them, for she would not long be left alone with that tranquil face, and that little secret smile. . . .

At last Madame Le Braz made her way, panting, for she was a fat woman, and full of years, up the long dark stair which led to

'Poldine's room. She had done her best, at first, to send her son home; but how was she, who had never made him obey her, to begin now? And when a certain look came upon his face, she dared meddle no more. After that, ashamed to go herself, she waylaid the neighbours at market or in the street, to ask how 'Poldine was; and she grew more and more puzzled when she received always the same answer:—

'*Mais* . . . quite well; at least, she says so; perfectly well.'

It was not natural, not comprehensible, that she should be so little disturbed, so little distressed; Madame Le Braz was a sensible woman, and it seemed to her that this was a serious matter. So she found herself at last, in the Clos à la Dame, with the intent to see for herself.

'But you cannot go in—it is impossible,' one of the neighbours expostulated, barring the way. 'She is tranquil, calm—if she sees you, it will upset her, and no one knows what may happen. Certainly you must leave her undisturbed.'

Laumec's mother lifted up her chin with a huge contempt.

'You call yourself a woman, and know no better!' she said, and swore a little, tangling the r's gutturally in her throat. 'You say she sits there smiling and saying nothing, day and night, and you want her left to herself! '*Cré nom!* Madame, if you want her to be an idiot, a *folle*. . . . I, I shall do the best I can for her, since it is my imbecile of a son that is playing this farce. I am ashamed of him, and I am sorry for her; and look you, it concerns my grandchild, the grandchild she is going to give me. . . . *quoi!* I don't choose that it shall be born dead . . . out of my way, do you hear? *F—moi le camp*, all of you; I am going in.'

Madame had a strong voice, as well as a large and muscular person; it is very certain she would have done what she chose in spite of any one's opposition. But the door was thrown open at this point by 'Poldine, who had roused herself quite unusually on hearing her mother-in-law outside, and greeted her with more than ordinary

friendliness. 'Poldine gave her a chair and set her own opposite, where she could still keep her eye upon the door. She was very pale, rather thin, and the smile spread about her lips began to have the appearance of a rictus; her mouth was drawn back, laying bare a slight continual gleam of teeth. Her face was tranquil enough and her brow unlined; her eyes had a blind look in them, as if they were focussed to a long distance, and all nearer things were dim and unreal. She spoke readily when questioned, but in few words; her voice had a peculiar thinness of tone, and, unless addressed, she was usually silent, though her lips moved often, as if she spoke to herself.

All this Madame Le Braz observed, with the keen perception of a woman who is as strong-minded as strong-bodied: and promptly deciding that this state of things must immediately be put an end to, she spoke of Laumec, watching the other closely as she did so.

'Poldine appeared to listen with the same divided interest she gave to all things, and still kept her eyes turned constantly to the door.

‘Oh, he will come back,’ she said, quietly. ‘Of course, he will come back when he has thought better of it. And it is not as if I were disagreeable about it, or made a fuss: I am really quite reasonable.’

Madame Le Braz looked about her before she answered, noting the wonderful cleanliness, the order, and the comfort of everything in the room. It is certain that she felt a little envious; it is probable she understood better why her son had found all this rather overwhelming.

‘I do not know,’ she said, at last, her eyes returning to ‘Poldine, and watching attentively the effect of her words. ‘I am not sure; he will come back if he is wise, but I rather think he is a fool.’

Then, still with keen observing eyes, she worked herself up into a sudden excitement that set her gross unwieldy body quivering, as if overcome by an angry emotion.

‘All my men are fools, look you! It runs in their blood!’ she cried hoarsely, with a constant interpolation of oaths, rolling gutturally through

her speech. 'Not one of them knows when he is well off, not one . . . There's my husband, who has wasted the little that came down to him from his fathers, who were once rich men in Trégonec ; yes, the richest of the *pays* . . . there's Fantic . . . there's Rodic . . . there's Mic., who gets into trouble every time he leaves the house ; there's your Laumec . . . I tell you, they're all fools, *ma bru*, and so you'll find, as I have done.'

'Poldine glanced about her tranquilly.

'Ah! but he will come back,' she repeated, with the same quiet conviction as before, 'when he has thought better of it. You see, he could be so comfortable here ; so very comfortable and—all that. He will remember, and he will not want to lose it for—nothing, really nothing. He will come back, when he has thought better of it.'

Madame Le Braz shook her head vigorously.

'You're wrong, *ma bru*, quite wrong,' she said, in her deep throaty voice. 'I don't deny you've got a nice place, a very nice place, and as

clean and sweet as the chapel of our Good Lady herself; but it takes a woman to look at all that, and know what it means. *We* understand what dust is, and the work that it takes to get a "shine" on one's *armaine* like that, or to keep a floor as clean as this is; but a man only sees that he's got to take his sabots off, and that he mustn't spit round about him, and he feels himself a great pig that brings in all the dirt from outside. . . . No, *ma bru*, it's not for your white curtains, and your pictures, and your grand china, that Laumec will come back, *dame!*'

'Poldine stared at her with an uneasy attention, forgetting, for a moment, to look at the door.

'No, it's not all that 'd bring him back,' the old woman repeated with emphasis, slapping her knee authoritatively. 'It's may be that that has helped—helped, mind you—to drive him away. Laumec's not used to fine things and fine ways, and you have perhaps frightened him, I don't say no, I don't say yes . . . but what would bring him back 'd be to feel himself master. A

man will be master in his own house, *my* men, that is ; they're as hard as nails, all the Le Braz, in spite of the soft outsides to 'em. They'd run their heads against a stone wall rather than get out of its way, all the Le Braz would, and I know 'em. It isn't the child that's at the bottom of it ; its your setting yourself against Laumec, against what he wants . . . you've got to give in, *ma bru*, if you want your man back ; and that's the long and the short of it. You're a soft little woman to look at ; but I doubt you have got something that's not soft at the core of you, and that's bad in a woman ; if you're proud, and if you're hard, you may wait, and you may wait, but you'll wait long ere you see anything of Laumec.'

Madame Le Braz paused to take breath, and surveyed 'Poldine attentively. She was looking straight before her, with a certain strained tranquillity, but the smile had left her face, and her lips quivered.

'It's only the giving in,' Laumec's mother went on, more gently. 'There needn't be any

difficulty about the child. He can stay with me; I suppose he will be another *vaurien* like my own boys, '*cré gosses* . . . and naturally he couldn't be here. Laumec hadn't any right to ask it of you; and I don't say you were wrong in refusing. Only, when one's man is a Le Braz, one has to humour him; you might have let him think you'd do as he wanted, and he'd have been quite happy, and then, if you'd spoken to me, I'd have managed it somehow, *tout doucement* . . . but it's too late now, and when a man that's a Le Braz and a Breton takes a fancy into his head, there's no use talking. But . . . I doubt you'll not get him back so surely as you think, *ma bru*. . . '

'Poldine did not seem to be listening very attentively.

'It's no use talking,' she repeated, in a low dull voice. 'One must wait, and presently he'll come back . . . certainly he will come back. And in the mean time I'm not angry, and I'm not ill, I'm only waiting.'

Suddenly she rose to her feet with a great

cry, and the calmness fell from her face as if a mask had been dropped from it.

‘—but he must come quickly, quickly, or I shall die!’ . . .

They hustled Madame Le Braz out of the room, reproaching her in angry whispers for having been the cause of this: even ‘Poldine’s timid little mother emerged from the corners, and bade her begone quaveringly, in a spasm of fear and indignation; backed up by the sympathetic neighbours.

The other stood for a moment at the top of the stairs, with a contemptuous smile on her fat pendulous mouth, wonderfully undisturbed in temper: in her own way she had been moved and touched, and was disinclined to anger. Beside these slim, genteel, pale-faced women, seamstresses and indoor workers, with their narrow breasts and tired eyes, she stood in all her coarse ugly bulk, ragged, unclean, un-beautiful: but huge with a certain monstrous dignity that did not seem out of place in the mother and wife of the Le Braz . . . once of Kerminihi.

‘You are all fools,’ she said presently, in the midst of their shrill whispered reproaches, her deep voice sounding deeper by contrast. ‘The girl would have gone mad, and the child would have died, if I had not roused her . . . now, I do not know what may happen, but she has a chance, *dame!* and you are all such cursed fools, that she owes it to me. Fetch the doctor and tell him all about it, and let him blame me if he likes; but I tell you, she is better *so* than as she was . . . only you are such fools, you do not understand.’

She swept them out of her way and descended the stairs as fast as she could: for though she did not doubt that what she had done was well done, yet the sound of those cries was terrible to her, and she was not sorry to leave them behind.

‘If it had not been my *gars*’ abominable folly that was to blame, I should not have cared—’ she muttered, winking her small yellow brown eyes, that had the bleared intelligent twinkle of those of a pig, set in a wide expanse

of flesh. 'But as it is, I am ashamed of him, the imbecile.'

And when she got home, she did her best to send Laumec to comfort and console his wife in her need ; but he only shrugged his shoulders and turned his back.

'What good can I do?' he said ; 'even if nothing had happened, they would have sent me away out of the house, till it was over. No, I wish her no ill ; why should I ? She is nothing to me, nothing more than any other woman. She will get through all right, as others do ; she is just the same as they are, it was only I that was fool enough to think her different. She must bear her own pains, be they sore or be they light ; no,—I will not go to her.'

Instead, he sat in the sun playing with the child, Jeannot, to whom he had attached himself with a visible intensity, spending on him all the love, the simple, unquestioning, half-religious love, which he had once given to 'Poldine. Day after day, he played with him, submitting himself to the child's will, bearing uncomplainingly

his every whim and fancy ; for Jeannot had strange fits of naughtiness, when a certain mocking beyond his years glittered in his eyes, and he turned from Laumec with every sign of dislike. And yet there were other times when he clung to his father, and seemed to care for no other in the world ; as if in him, La Goutte and Marie Gouäs had each a visible share. And meanwhile, 'Poldine lay between life and death, constantly calling upon her husband ; she was no longer calm, no longer reasonable.

One dark day in early December a message came that there was no disputing ; Laumec must go, and at once, or he might be too late. Even he dared not refuse ; but he picked up Jeannot silently, sweeping his mother out of his way, and carried him again in the crook of his arm, back the same way that he had brought him through the dark once before, on the night he had left 'Poldine alone. On the stair and at her door they tried to stop him and to take the child away ; but he had only one answer for all their remonstrances.

‘Where I go, the boy goes; and if he may not go in, then neither will I.’

Then the doctor came to the door, sharply, though under his breath, ordering silence; and Laumec, following him closely into the room, set Jeannot unperceived down upon the mat by the fire, where he had sat once before.

There was a great silence about the bed, where the doctor bent anxiously; and when he presently signed to Laumec to come near, he did not give up his own place by the pillow, but remained, watching closely every change that took place. ‘Poldine opened her eyes and looked up; then she smiled, and for a moment, at the sight of that pale brightness, her husband’s face flushed and trembled, as if something within him were breaking and giving way; but his wife turned her eyes past him, with a triumphant serenity that directed his attention to the oak cradle, standing near the fire. Her lips opened with a flutter and an infinitely small sound reached him.

‘Our child—’ she said,

Laumec did not answer; he stepped a little back from the bed, but her fingers had twisted themselves about his hand, and the doctor signed to him imperiously to keep still. They stood for a long time in perfect silence; at first 'Poldine muttered a little inaudibly, and her eyelids flickered as if with a restlessness that she was too weak to show otherwise; but presently her breathing grew softer and more steady, and the big over-bright eyes closed in a light but quiet sleep. As her clasp relaxed, her husband drew away from the bedside, and the doctor followed him, with a sigh of relief.

'If she sleeps long enough, she'll do—' he muttered, very softly. 'It's that terrific excitement I'm afraid of; it may leave a permanent mischief behind it—keep the room absolutely quiet, and send the baby in to a neighbour; I can't have the chance of its crying here. And . . . what's this brat doing here? Take it away at once—' he said irritably, becoming aware of the other child, who was staring about him

solemnly, with an interest that kept him silent, 'it's disgraceful that he should be here.'

Laumec caught him up in his arms, and his face flushed scarlet.

'The boy goes where I go—' he said.

The doctor looked at him curiously, and then with a quick unexpected movement, pushed him out of the room and into another, where the cradle had already been carried.

'The boy may go where you please,' he said drily, 'though if I've heard the story aright, it's no particular credit to you. But you have no right to try and commit murder, and if he had waked your wife, the chances are she would have died. I'm not at all sure,' he added, still more drily, 'that you are *not* her murderer as it is — always supposing that I've heard the story right.'

Laumec stared at him sullenly.

'Do you think women in that condition are to be treated as if they were stones?' and the doctor pointed at him with a tobacco-stained forefinger. 'She may live, or she may not; and

there's almost worse that may come to her than death. . . . I don't like that long excitement—and it's practically your doing; I hope you understand that?'

The other turned to leave the room, without making any answer. 'Halt!' and the doctor jerked him back by his sleeve. 'You've got a son here, and one that is no shame to you: I should think that you would have the decency to want to look at him. *Mère Roussel*,' and he turned to 'Poldine's mother, who had taken the little bundle out of the cradle, 'bring that grandchild of yours here, that we may admire him. A fine child, and a healthy one; it's astonishing under the circumstances.'

Laumec, holding Jeannot tightly in his arms, glanced at the baby indifferently.

'He's like his mother,' he said: 'he doesn't take after me.'

'A good thing too—not to have a *tête de brett*—' the doctor muttered between his teeth. 'Yes, he's like his mother, and he could not do better than take after her, either; it's a fine thing

to have something of the mother in one, when she's a good woman, *bien entendu* . . .' he paused a minute, and then glanced sharply at Jeannot. 'I suppose you think he's nobody's child but your own, because he's got your black face upon him; but you'll find you're wrong, *mon gars*, and some day you may find a resemblance cropping out in him that you don't like. That's what we call heredity nowadays; it used to be the hand of God . . . bah! You don't understand. Go away, *mon bonhomme*; go away and get drowned at the Banks. It's about all you're good for . . .'

Laumec turned off with a shrug, and left the doctor grumbling to himself; it was his way, and no one paid very much attention to it, which was, perhaps, a pity; for what he said was worth listening to, and he was generally right.

'Poldine recovered; and when they told her how near she had been to death, she stared a little, and shook her head.

'I don't remember,' she said, incredulously. 'You must surely be mistaken.'

But her illness had left its mark on her ; perhaps no one but the doctor knew how surely, or how deep.

She had lost her old serenity, her tranquil conviction of superiority ; or, at least, with a remaining outward semblance of it, the thing itself had gone : when her face was calmest, and her lips smiled, a profound trouble and excitement shone in her eyes. Sometimes she folded her hands in her lap, as she had used to do ; but they fluttered and moved restlessly, as if even her strong will could not force them to be still ; and yet, when there were others about her, she smiled, and spoke, and dusted her room, with apparently all her old calm and cheerful neatness. Yes, perhaps it was only the doctor who noted the change at first, and who observed the strained hunted look that crept sometimes into her troubled eyes ; and who found out from her mother that though she rarely spoke of her husband, yet she sat continually within sight of the door, lest he should come in suddenly, and take her unawares. And seeing and noting all

this, he thought of her often and anxiously, and with a certain uneasiness not to be dispelled from his mind ; though, when 'Poldine's mother asked him now and then, with a nervous quaver in her voice, what he thought of it all, he sent her back into her corners comforted by cheerful words. Yet, one day when he met Madame Le Braz, recognising her shrewd good sense, he spoke more plainly.

'Yes, she's well, perfectly well, as to her body: I wish I was as sure of her as to her . . . in other ways. She's gone through so much ; the illness, her confinement, and she keeps up such a strain on herself—No, I can't tell you anything more, for there isn't anything to tell. You did your best for her ; it was risky, but it gave her a chance. It remains to be seen whether she's taken it . . . I am going to talk to her one of these days ; I don't know if it will do any good, though.'

Soon after that he did speak to her, of Laumec.

Why don't you go to see him?' he said.

‘You are strong enough now, and on a fine day, it could not hurt you. I don’t doubt that if you saw each other, all this foolish trouble would be swept away.’

‘Poldine shook her head.

‘It could not make any difference,’ she said. ‘He would not come back unless I gave in about the child, and that’s impossible.’

The Doctor pulled his moustache thoughtfully.

‘Ye—es ;’ he remarked presently. ‘I suppose it is. And yet—don’t you think—if it were to win your husband back—?’

‘No, not even for that,’ she answered, calmly enough. ‘You don’t understand ; I couldn’t have the child here, and yet it isn’t altogether the boy . . . it’s rather that I can’t give in, and Laumec can’t give in—I wouldn’t know how to do it ; it isn’t . . . my way. And if I did, it would never be the same as before.’

‘He would only care the more for you—.’

She shook her head again.

‘No—he would be the master, and I should have to do whatever he wanted. He would

beat me, perhaps; I daresay he would, if he were angry. I couldn't stand it, not the beating, but the being under; he's only a Terreneuvas, and . . . no, I couldn't come down to that. I'd rather he hated me, than that he looked down on me; and anyway . . . I couldn't give in.'

'You are both mad, and I don't know which of you is the worst,' and the Doctor took up his hat with a little stamp of impatience. 'I've heard of Breton obstinacy, but I never met with it before, never saw anything like this—and you seem, both of you, to have some grudge against the child that ought to have brought you together.'

'Poldine glanced towards the baby, which was being rocked beside the fire in her mother's arms.

'It is well enough,' she said indifferently. 'But it isn't like its father. It's like no one in the world but me.'

'Well, that's exactly what *he* said,' grumbled the Doctor.

'If it had been like him,' she went on, her

face suddenly flushing, 'I couldn't have helped caring for it; and perhaps it might have helped . . . but as it is—' she paused, and put her hand on the Doctor's arm, swaying him to and fro in her repressed excitement; '—the—other—is like him;' she said, 'that's the horrible thing; if the boy were here, I would love him, I couldn't help myself; and then some day when out of his father's face he looked at me with those eyes, those dreadful mocking eyes of La Goutte—I should kill him—I know I should kill him.'

The doctor looked steadily into her eyes, that glittered with a strange blind brightness, their pupils contracted to mere specks, and silenced her with an authoritative movement of his hand.

'These are things you must not say,' he said, sternly, 'and you must still less let yourself think of them. It is by allowing oneself to have such wicked and foolish fancies that many dreadful things happen . . . do you understand? *Mo' pawv' fill*', you must be careful, you must

be very careful. Perhaps it is my fault for talking to you, so I will go away: but you must just be quiet and patient, and very good to your baby, and everything will come right in time. And I think,' he added, with the awkwardness of a man who does not believe in what he recommends, though he feels it is his duty to say it: 'that you should go to church, or *à confesse*.' . . . He stammered a little: 'Poldine's eyes were so terribly and maliciously observant in the midst of her calm face.

'Yes—' she said with her usual docility, 'I will go, some day, when M. le Curé is there; he does not give one a hard penance, and he does not keep one long: I will go, certainly—but all the same,' she added, following him out to the landing, with a little cunning smile in her furtive eyes, 'it was true what I said. I could love that child—because he is like his father; but to get rid of his mother's eyes, I would kill him—certainly I would kill him.'

CHAPTER V

THE winter went on, and everything took its usual course; now it was spring again, the first, early, fugitive spring, that comes when the February cold takes flight, and a broad, pale sunshine lies wide and white upon field, and road, and shore. The sea was blue, with shifting patches of purple and green, and little fretful flecks of foam; the sky was blue, too, but with a pale silvery azure, and long streaks of filmy wind-driven clouds drifting across it. People opened wide the double doors that had been shut all winter, and let in the air of the young year to their living rooms; in passing along the streets, one looked in also, and shared for a moment the life of each successive family. One could see the bare, clean floor, the scanty furniture, the white beds over against the wall; one could watch the soup

simmering on every tiny stove, and note the paper flowers and grasses set before the little group of crucifix, and Virgin, and patron saint. And there was something in these bare, well-swept, comfortless rooms, something that was fresh and wholesome as the large air itself, a sensation as of an out-door life, not to be caged long within four walls; something caught, perhaps, from the wind and the sea, that had swept about the walls of St. Élie for so many centuries. . . .

In the town, every one laughed and was cheerful, for winter was over, and soon it would be summer, when one went a-harvesting amongst the Parisians, and filled one's pocket with gold pieces; every one laughed, for here it takes as little to make one laugh as to make one angry, and much less than it needs for tears.

'*Hé, toi!*' they cried to each other from their door-steps. '*C'est donc fini, l'mauvais temps, et p'r tout de bon po'vrai?*'

And the other replied in a cheerful accustomed formula.

‘*Dame, ça va et’ beau, la saison ! J’tu crois !*’

But even this was not said without an accompaniment of laughter, the loud easy laughter that is born of sunshine and sweet air, and a thirst constantly to be assuaged with cider. Lent had come, and one had gone dutifully to mass, for one was religious in the old town, and the white church steeple did not lift its beckoning finger for nothing; Lent had come, and one had to *faire maigre*, with much bargaining over fresh sardines and shellfish and the salt cod that came from Iceland or the Banks; but outside, and in spite of Monsieur le Curé, life began to wake itself up again to the long jollity of summer. Mass was all very well, and one must do one’s duty that way, with a forward eye cast upon the Easter confessions, or one would have truly impossible penances; but with fairs on all sides, with assemblies on every Sunday, with the lingering carnival gaiety and the new life waking and walking in the street, it was not possible to shut oneself up soberly within four walls.

Perhaps it was, the change in the streets that was the most noticeable; all winter they had been silent, but for the *raccomodeur*, the town crier; silent, but for the gay songs of men returning homewards at night from the cafés, as soon as little 'Noguette' sang out in her shrill alto, the ten o'clock curfew; silent, but for a marriage party walking the streets to the accompaniment of '*Meunier, tu dors!*' or the conscripts, with their numbers upon their caps, singing boisterously and out of tune, an ancient and interminable *Chanson longue*.

But now there were other things to hear; women came round with their baskets heavy with cockles and 'bigorneaux'; and half-a-dozen new cries were loud about the streets. On all the earlier Sundays of Lent, carnival took a brief unauthorised outing; in the Rue des Bois the old clothes shops were gay with masquerade dresses to be hired, more or less hideous with age and use, and every other shop bloomed into a monstrous growth of masks. Sunday after Sunday, a motley crowd

filled the narrow streets, and besieged the 'chevaux-de-bois' outside the Grand' Porte; a crowd of church-goers and pleasure-seekers, of sober citizens and travestied maskers, of false noses and grotesque heads, side by side with hurrying priests and white-capped grave-eyed sisters of charity. And in the quiet side-alleys, here and there an old man went from house to house, singing in his uncertain voice the cantique of the Passion, the beautiful local cantique that, when he was young, every one had sung in Lent, as they sang the gay cheerful Alleluia at Easter-tide. Now he alone, and he was the last, went round singing the Passion from door to door, to those who were not away merry-making down yonder in the crowd; and who listened to him perhaps a little sadly, remembering long-ago days when they had heard it first.

'Nous voici dans votre Cour
Pour chanter des Louanges—'

Yes, that was already long ago, when St Èlie was shut in more closely than now by its great

walls of stone, and its greater outer walls of sea and rock, and difficult, dangerous coast. And they had been sung, those praises, longer ago still, when the Corsairs were princes of the town and lent money to kings, and when the old ships were hung up in the church by their mothers and wives, to be presently draped in dust and forgetfulness. And further, further back still, before there was yet any town upon this rock at all, or any sea spreading itself about it, before the great forest had been swept out of sight by the waters that came in with the sound of thunder, they must have been sung, or something like them, by the hermit who lifted his hands warningly towards the distant line of blue:—

‘Vous verrez la mer surmonter
Plus haut que les montagnes !’

Yes, surely he must have said that; only it is so long ago, so very long ago, that it is out of the minds of all men.

‘La Passion du doux Jésus,
Oh mon Dieu ! qu’elle est grande !’ . . .

The voice of the old man trembles into silence as the plaintive cantique came to its end ; a sou is put into his hand, and he passes on, his back bent and his legs feeble, though they have so slight a weight to carry, He has forgotten the Alleluia, the gay gleeful Alleluia of Easter-tide, and even if he remembered it, he could not sing it now ; he is the last, the very last, of those who came thus from door to door. Down at the Grand' Porte one can hear the steam-organ of the roundabout, the trumpets and drums of the shows ; here, in the alley that winds darkly between overhanging houses, there is only the plaintive cadence of the ' Passion,'

' Oh mon Dieu, qu'elle est grande ! ' . . .

There were other crowds, also, that came on week days as well as Sundays, from the earliest days of March. These were men and women from the country in greater part, the women in a various adornment of coiffes, the men in sea-blue, talking a patois that was neither Breton

nor French. They came in, these, the Terre-neuvas and the Islandais, for the 'Revue'; to answer to and sign their engagements, made informally in the cabarets soon after their return last November; and after they had enrolled themselves at the 'Marine,' they went to touch the advance of their season's pay, at the offices of the shipowners. It was a large sum that came to them, as much, sometimes, as five hundred francs; it meant the food and lodging, the whole livelihood, perhaps, of those who stayed behind, and they came in, the wives and mothers, to watch over it, and see that it was not spent at the cabarets. It was, nevertheless, not taken home intact, for there were purchases to be made; oilskins and sou'westers, monstrous knitted gloves and comforters, huge boots, with leather tops nailed on to blackened sabots; there were clothes to be bought, and perhaps, if there were time, a chaplet or a picture, to be taken to the church and blessed by Monsieur le Curé. Afterwards they went out to the Quai des Anglais, the men with gaudy paper flowers

pinned to their coats or caps, and shrill concertinas in their hands ; the women laden with parcels, and an orange or some toys for the children left at home. All along the quai were *baraqués* and small booths, where one might buy sausages and galettes, the good little galettes made of *blé noir*, that a few miles further inland are called *sarrasins* ; *cracquelins* and *cimereaux* in huge quaint baskets, just as they were sold, unchanged, here, or in the older town across the bay that now has vanished, some thousand years ago. There are shooting booths and lotteries, stalls of nuts and oranges, stands of wool monkeys and uncouth playthings ; there are dolls that are but an oblong piece of wood, with a rounded end ; there are *langues de ma bellemère*, there are *œufs de Japon*, there are . . . ah well ! and these are all for the Terreneuvas ; for the last days at home of the Terreneuvas and the Islandais, who will presently go out into the broad embrace of the sea, the treacherous caresses of the fogs, and the long grey days when there is no time for

rest, no time for anything but work. And for some of them, surely these are their last days at home. . . .

There are roundabouts also, with their loud shrill organs ; there are perhaps a couple of hundred concertinas playing as many tunes ; there is the tramp of all these sabots, the clatter of all these voices, the ring of an incessant laughter ; for since there is not long now, till one by one the boats slip out from the docks into the bay, to sail with the tide, one may as well laugh while one can. And every day, along the Quai des Anglais, there is the semblance of a fair : for the Terreneuvas and the Islandais are trooping into the town by thousands, and they have money to spend, and want to be amused ; they want to forget that yonder, just over there, all the length of the docks, the goëlettes are loading up, and the long triple line of them is loud with a hum and a flitting to and fro, that means they will soon, very soon, be ready to set sail.

Laumec shook off a little of his sullen humour

as the days brightened, and winter shook a parting thumb at the world, disappearing in a sudden swirl of snow, the only snow of the year, that melted as it fell. The need for laughter, for fresh air, awoke in him too; and he stretched himself as if his limbs had shrunk during the dull dark days that he had spent lounging about the cabin on the high road, or in the nearest cabaret in the nearest quarter of the town. His step grew more alert, his eyes clearer, his voice less curt and brief; a new life seemed to rise in him as the sap, in spring, rises in the trees. He turned a deaf indifferent ear, when his mother railed at him and ordered him home to his wife, instead of rushing violently into a loud quarrel as he would have done all winter; he laughed unconcernedly where before he would have scowled, and he whistled to Jeannot when he perched him upon his shoulder. But he did not go back to 'Poldine; that was less possible than ever now, when the anger, and with it the love, had died out, and the whole underlying nature of the man

had set and moulded itself into an inflexible, irrevocable, resentment and obstinacy.

‘*Hé, nous allons voir, ce que nous allons voir !*’ he chanted to Jeannot, who opened wide his big blue eyes in frank anticipation ; and together they set out for the Quai des Anglais, where the stalls were, and the lotteries, and the cheveux-de-bois. And Laumec laughed when Jeannot laughed, with a loud ready laughter that did not lighten the shadows that lay beneath his drooping brows ; and all about them others came and went, laughing also,—women in white coiffes, and men in sea-blue, with gay careless lips, and in their eyes, the nearness of departure. And sometimes Laumec took Jeannot to see the goëlettes, and chatted with the men that worked about them, nodding his head as if well pleased, as they sank daily lower in the water with the weight of their cargo, and day by day, one, or two, or three, stole away silently, and spread their white wings to the wind. For now it was well into March, and the docks were emptying ; there was no longer a

triple line of Terreneuvas and St. Pierrais fringing the quai, and the old grey church at the far end looked forlornly down a daily widening lane of water ; day after day, as the tide rose high about the walls of St. Èlie, there were women waiting on the Tête Blanche to watch one or other of the goëlettes glide away between the islands ; and day by day, some of those who had laughed so loudly went home, alone, to the houses and villages that were so strangely empty and deserted, and laughed, for a little while, no more.

But on the Quai des Anglais there was still a constant crowd amid the booths and the lotteries and the roundabouts, for there were still the steamers to wait for—the steamers that would carry away the last of the Terreneuvas, the couple of thousand men and more who were to join their goëlettes at St. Pierre et Miquelon—the steamers, in one of which Laumec had his berth. But if any shadow lay upon him, it was not the shadow of departure ; he brightened as the time drew near, and made his few arrange-

ments cheerfully. It was hard, very hard, to leave Jeannot; but he had already planned to take him, as soon as a careful mendacity made it possible, with himself as a '*mousse*.' In the mean time, he would stay in the charge of his grandmother, who spent her moods upon him prodigally; cuffing him one moment, adoring him the next, swearing at him always with a smacking accompaniment of slaps and kisses, and with it all obtaining from him the same cheerful disobedience which her own sons had unanimously given her. With her, Jeannot would be happy enough; if either suffered, it would not be he. And Laumec grinned a little to himself as he pictured his mother hurling her increasing bulk here and there after every mischief of the self-willed urchin, and making the highway vocal with her changing temper.

Meanwhile, in the Clos à la Dame, winter had crept away also and spring had come; but 'Poldine wondered sometimes how many years had gone by between Christmas and Lent. Once she startled her mother, who was rocking

the baby by the fireside, with a sudden question.

‘How long is it, since . . . since Laumec came home?’

La Mère Roussel looked at her askance.

‘But it was in October, *mo’ fill*’, and this is March—’ she said, her eyebrows twitching nervously, and her small shadowy figure bobbing on her chair as if prepared to take flight. ‘You surely have not forgotten?’

‘I thought it was longer—much longer,’ and ‘Poldine looked confused. ‘I thought it was . . . when I was young.’

Her mother rose with the baby in her arms and fluttered to the door; she often took refuge with a neighbour nowadays, when these things happened.

‘She is so odd, so . . . unlike herself,’ she confided tremulously to any one who would listen to her. ‘Yes, very quiet, very gentle, but so . . . so strange at times. I am afraid of her, yes, and there is the child, *pauv’ p’tit’ amour*, that she will not look at it—’

So it came that ‘Poldine was left long hours

alone, with the sunshine spreading in broad pools on her spotless floor, and gilding the quaint carvings of the chest and *armaine*, the white-hung beds in the corners, and her own hands that lay idly, restlessly before her. She looked at them sometimes as if they were strange to her, these thin idle hands with their intertwining fingers; it seemed to her that once she surely had others than these, capable hands and busy, that set themselves unweariedly to a never-ending multitude of tasks. And sometimes, too, she lifted and examined them, with a sudden frightened curiosity, as if some new and fearful thought were connected with them, as if she asked herself what these idle, restless hands might some day do—

Nevertheless, but for that increasing trouble in her eyes, and the occasional strangeness of her speech, 'Poldine was not changed at all, not at all, in the careless eyes of those who saw her day by day. True, she stayed almost constantly at home, but she had done so since the early days of her marriage; and in the mornings she went

occasionally to Mass, occasionally to market, as every one else did. She was always tranquilly cheerful, ready to answer pleasantly all who spoke to her, prodigally smiling; just the same quiet, trim, exquisitely clean and well-kept little woman that they had always known her. They did not observe how seldom she spoke of her own accord; they did not see the quick furtive brilliance of her eyes, and instinctively she hid from them the restlessness which sometimes seized her; and the confused bewilderment that often lay upon her thoughts. To them all, she was just what she had always been, except for the touch of interest and romance about her; she was a deserted wife, unrighteously deserted, and they pitied her with all their hearts. And when her mother came away from her with the baby held tight in her arms, babbling to them that she was afraid to be left alone with her daughter, the neighbours smiled at each other good-naturedly, and said between themselves that *la mère Roussel* was old, very old, and growing a little *manique*.

But, however slowly time passes, still it must pass, with time ; and even to 'Poldine, in the Clos à la Dame, spring came with the brightening days of March. Spring came—and its sunshine stirred her ; she moved fitfully about the room, and stood long at the window, looking out, not at the old town below her, but at the stretch of water, blue, and purple, and green, as if stained with the fretting of the winter storms, and fretted with small white heads of foam, that lifted themselves here and there, looking to 'Poldine like a myriad of tiny sails spreading themselves in the wind.

Then one day she opened the oak cupboard, and took out the Breton pottery, the wooden spoon, the gold and scarlet vase with its rotten nosegay, the plate with its bunch of wrinkled mouldy grapes, just as she had put them away, herself, months before, in the furthest corner ; and she set them upon the little white cloth, pushing the table into the sunshine near the window, with the armchair beside it, the armchair that she had bought for Laumec, and in which

no one else might sit. When presently her mother came in, bending under the double burden of the baby and a market-basket, 'Poldine was moving radiantly about the little table, her lips moving silently, her eyes fixed upon the empty armchair ; it was the old woman's startled cry that roused her, and brought her to herself. She passed her hand across her face, and muttered something confusedly ; then she looked again at the chair, and the brightness fell away from her smiling lips. After a minute's silence, she turned to her mother, with a clearer directness in her eyes and voice than had long been common to her.

'Don't look so frightened,' she said, with an unusual kindness. 'Its nothing—I had only been thinking of . . . of Laumec, and I fancied that he was really here. But I think—I have not been noticing the time ; it must be spring—mother, when do the steamers go ? When does . . . he go ? It must be soon—.'

La mère Roussel laid the baby in the cradle, and eyed her daughter anxiously, though with a

certain relief ; for 'Poldine was less unlike herself to-night than she had been for a long time.

'He goes in the "Gallia," to-morrow'—she quavered shrilly. 'It starts with the evening tide this year, not the morning one. And to-day he has gone to Les Guerets, with the others.'

'Poldine looked surprised.

'To Les Guerets?' she said. 'In pilgrimage?'

The old woman nodded.

'They say he did not want to go, but Monsieur le Curé insisted. And it is to be very grand this year, much more than usual ; with a special prayer for the Terreneuvas and all they leave behind. Yes ; Monsieur le Curé insisted upon it.'

'Poldine reflected for a minute or two, and her face grew gradually radiant in its serenity and conviction.

'Yes, Les Guerets—' she said softly. 'It is a sin, a great sin, to go on pilgrimage to the *bonne Vierge* with a bad hard heart. Even he would surely not dare—and there is to be a prayer for those who are left behind—'

She paused again, and looked up at the mantel-shelf, where the Virgin and St Joseph stood on either side of the crucifix, with a rosary from Lourdes hanging on the wall above them. To 'Poldine, religion was perhaps primarily a thing of processions and ceremonies, and it is a question whether the paper flowers and the tapers set in front of the plaster figures on the mantelpiece, were not a more intimate satisfaction to her than a whole chaplet of Ave Marias : it had not occurred to her hitherto, that in this way she might find help. But now a sudden warm assurance woke within her, as she remembered that it was a sin, a very great sin, to go on pilgrimage with an unforgiving heart, and besides, there was a prayer for her, for 'Poldine, since she was one of those to be left behind.

She put her hand on her mother's shoulder caressingly. 'We will leave out the things,' she said, 'till to-morrow. It is not worth putting them away again, for they will be wanted, certainly they will be wanted—I will

see Laumec, and it will be all right ; he will come home with me, just for a little, before he goes away. Yes, he will not be able to resist both the *bonne Vierge* and me . . .’

She turned to the cradle, and stooping over it, looked long at the baby that lay in it asleep, while her mother hovered suspiciously round. Then she straightened herself with a long regretful sigh.

‘I should have loved it,’ she said sorrowfully, ‘if it had been the least bit like him.’

Next day the Quai des Anglais was crowded with a dense black mass of people, and one would have said that a great fair was in full swing under the walls of the old town. And so it was ; only such a fair as one sees rarely elsewhere.

There were crowds round every booth and stall ; crowds besieged the roundabouts, and emptied the huge wicker baskets of their freight of crisp golden-coloured *cracquelins* and *cimereaux*. The organs of the *chevaux-carrousel*s were playing blatantly ; every baraque

was hideous with drum and cymbals : there were concertinas, whistles, steam sirens, and every imaginable variety of horn, and cornet, and trumpet, lending themselves riotously to an indescribable whole. There was besides a constant roar of voices, a huge incessant laughter that was more loud than gay, and the tramp of innumerable feet ; for all the town had turned out to see the departure of the two thousand odd Terreneuvas who were to leave to-day ; the last to start for the season ;—the last—who would leave such an emptiness behind them. And so the Quai was black with a shifting pack of people, and round the “ Gallia ” and her sister steamer, there was a dense tumultuous crowd that had to be beaten off by force from the gangways.

All sorts of unlikely things were hawked along the Quai des Anglais—penny note books, artificial flowers, absurd and useless trifles ; but here, where the steamers lay, there was no small commerce going on, only the struggling crowd closing upon the men as they forced their way

through the gangways, followed by a friend or two—men also, whom they kissed boisterously, and with an exaggerated cheerfulness. They had left their women—who could not be trusted to laugh or be reasonable—along the quai, on the outskirts of the crowd, whence they could run, presently, to the Tête Blanche. Then they pushed their way on to the gangways, between the double row of gend'armes and douaniers, where they were searched rapidly for spirits; and were hurried on board, one by one, a long procession, sometimes to the sound of a crash of falling glass, as a confiscated bottle was broken against the steamer's side, amid a louder scream of laughter, and that dull, continuous roar which is the voice of a great crowd. And so the steamers gradually filled, and the time of starting drew near. . . .

'Poldine had found a place close to the gangway of the 'Gallia,' where she waited, fierce-eyed and white-faced, staring desperately about her. All day she had sought for Laumec, and all day she had missed him; wherever she had gone,

there he had been just before, and she had started again on his track. She had lost all the serene hopefulness which had dwelt with her since the day before ; had lost the clearer reason which had driven the trouble from her eyes. All day long she had hurried hither and thither through the crowd, bewildered by the noise of it, the gaiety of it, after the long quietness of the Clos à la Dame ; all day long, without food and without rest, she had struggled this way and that, buffeted and hustled, her eyes straining desperately in the effort to find her husband. And now she had fought, and pushed, and persisted, till she had gained this place where he must pass her, where she could speak to him, and win at least one kind word, one forgiving look from him before he left ; it was so little, so little to ask, and yet it meant so much to her ; surely, surely, he would not refuse her that.

And so she waited, desperately, determinedly, giving way to none ; her head light and dizzy from want of food, and hot with the fever born of March sunshine, her eyes glittering, and that

terrible restlessness plucking at her like a consuming fire. Yet here, at least, she would see him, if no more, and she waited, in the midst of the heaving pressure, the dull, continuous roar, of the crowd.

It was not till the steam siren had been turned towards the town, and twice called up the laggards with its long angry wail, that Laumec appeared, moving leisurely, and with a quite apparent indifference to the fact that it was within a few minutes of the starting hour. He had been through it all so often, he knew there was no need to hurry; and then he had no farewells to make, or only one—for he carried Jeannot on his shoulder, laughing with delight to find himself so high above every one else. On they came, slowly but steadily, Laumec clearing a passage with the irresistible pressure of his broad shoulders, Jeannot aloft, shouting and gleeful, and the *père* Le Braz, for once sober, making his way with difficulty behind them; on they came, till they reached the gangway where 'Poldine stood, and where now the crowd had

thinned a little and fallen back, leaving a small clear space.

Then,—it all happened so quickly and so quietly, that to those about, it seemed as if with scarcely a delay he was hurried, the last of the laggards, across the gangway and on to the steamer.

'Poldine had sprung forward and caught him by the arm, quivering, as if under a lash, at the sudden cloud that fell upon him at the sight of her.

'Husband!' she said, 'for the love of God, give me one good word before you go!'

He stared at her resentfully.

'Will you take the child?' he said.

'Poldine hesitated. Then she gathered herself together.

'No!'

Laumec responded with an oath.

'And I would not have trusted him with you, if you had said yes a hundred times over!' he said. 'He is more to me than ever you were!'—and he laughed, with a fierce enjoyment of her white despairing face.

Up above, on his shoulder, Jeannot laughed also, and looked down upon her with mischief and glee lighting his blue eyes.

Then the intolerable sense of misery in her flamed into a furious anger; she raised her hand,—that nervous unfamiliar hand which she had looked at so fearfully,—and Jeannot looked at her, and laughed at her, no longer . . .

A roar of voices, a sudden backward rush of the crowd, the last impatient wail of the steam-siren, the gend'armes seizing the laggards and forcing them on board; a fury of shouting about her, and an equal fury within tearing riotously at her deafened ears . . . 'Poldine saw nothing, knew nothing, understood nothing at first but that unspeakable noise about and inside of her. She found herself saying 'An accident,—an accident,' with lips that closed unwillingly on the word; and she put up her hand to her throat to choke back the triumphant outcry that lay there and longed to break loose.

'He will laugh at me no more, the brat, with his mother's eyes.' . . .

She saw, confusedly, that Laumec was struggling with the gensd'armes, who swept him on board ; she saw that he was struggling, shouting, trying to make them hear or understand ; but in the sudden wild excitement of departure they had seen nothing happen, and in the roar rising from the crowd upon the quay, his voice was lost. She saw, too, without looking at it, the small dark figure lying at her feet, its head pillowed on an iron ring,—a great iron ring on which the little head had chanced to fall.

Slowly, steadily, irrevocably, with a last long whistle, and an accompanying roar of steam, a quiver running through her as if she awoke from sleep, the 'Gallia' swung out into the fairway. The strip of water widened rapidly between her black side and the loud-lunged crowd that raced after her along the quay, till, as the pack thinned and scattered, there was only 'Poldine left standing, with the little figure lying motionless at her feet.

And suddenly from the steamers, where the men swarmed on the decks and on the rigging,

and from the quay, where the people ran, and the Tête Blanche, where the women waited, the old cantique swelled out sonorously, with its haunting sadness of farewell :

‘Ave, Maris Stella, Dei mater alma—’

while 'Poldine saw only that Laumec, struggling between his men, stretched out a hand towards her, a hand that made her shudder, a hand that cast her off, condemned her, cursed her . . .

And the steamer drew away steadily, slowly, irrevocably, bearing with her many that would return, and some for whom there would be no homecoming.

CHAPTER VI

IN the Clos à la Dame, 'Poldine came and went lightly, on tiptoe, and her room was hushed and dark. She had sent her mother away to the neighbours, with the baby that was hers and yet was so little to her because it had no look of its father; and in its place she had brought home the other, the boy Jeannot.

It was she who had lifted him up from the stone quay, where he lay with his head on its cruel pillow of iron; it was she who had sent the *père* Le Braz home empty-handed, driving him off with incoherent words and fierce eyes, before which he fell back, trembling. And it was she who had sent for the doctor, and met him at the door with the

same phrase ready on her lips,—‘An accident, an accident.’

The doctor looked from her to the child, and back again to her: then his eyes dropped curiously to the nervous quivering fingers that interlaced themselves in front of her, and he opened his mouth as if to ask a question. But before any sound came, he checked himself, and in an unusual silence he turned away and busied himself about the child that lay on the bed. It was a long time before he had done with him; and even then for a while he did not speak, but stood as if reflecting, his eyes wandering about the room, and sometimes resting, with a troubled uncertainty, on ‘Poldine.

‘Who will nurse him?’ he said at last. ‘For he cannot possibly be moved.’

‘I will,’ she answered, without any hesitation.

The doctor looked at her again, and then turned to walk once or twice up and down the room, his hands behind his back, his head bent, as if in thought; and she, in her turn,

watched him anxiously. As he came near her, she put out her hand and caught him by the arm.

‘He will be quite safe with me,’ she said, tremulously. ‘I will do everything you tell me . . . and I . . . love him. He is like his father, and—’ she paused and caught her breath in a smothered sob; ‘he is all I have now!’ she cried.

The doctor looked at her again, and she flushed crimson.

‘It was an accident—an accident—’ she protested; and then as he glanced again with a strange significant curiosity at her interlacing hands, she began to cry feebly.

‘I did not mean to hurt him; but the eyes—his eyes—they drove me mad, when they laughed!’

He put her into a chair and sat down beside her. ‘*Voyons, ma pauvre fille*’, you are going to tell me all about it. A doctor is as good—or as bad—as a priest.’

It was a long time before he went away from

the Clos à la Dame; the good gruff doctor, with his shabby coat and empty pockets, had always leisure for those who needed him. And when he went, he left Jeannot undisturbed, with 'Poldine as his nurse, 'Poldine alone.

'Remember, I am trusting you rather terribly —' he said to her, 'rather terribly, and you must not disappoint me. It is all very well loving the boy, now, because he is like his father; but what if he gets better, if he opens his eyes and looks at you and laughs? There must be no more . . . accidents; you understand that.'

'I know,' she said, humbly. 'Indeed, indeed, I know. But so long as he only lives—you are sure, quite sure, that he will get better?'

'Yes,' he said, with a curious look in his eyes. 'I do not think there is any danger . . . of death. He will recover — there is no reason why he should not *live*.'

'Poldine did not observe either the emphasis or the hesitation with which he spoke: she drew a long breath of relief.

'You see, it is different now,' she explained,

more cheerfully. 'Quite different, Laumec has cursed me, and I . . . it was a sin; oh, of course it was a sin . . . but if I do penance for it, I shall be forgiven. And every time that he looks at me *so*, I shall say an Ave, and it will be a penance, don't you see? so that Laumec will forgive me, and the *bonne Vierge* will help.'

The doctor shook his head doubtfully.

'I hope so,' he muttered. 'I'm sure I hope so; and for your sake, *ma pauvre fill*', we'll try.'

For he had two patients in the Clos à la Dame, and perhaps it was not for Jeannot that he feared the most.

He went straight from thence to the Le Braz cabin on the highway side, and sat down on the tree trunk that lay along its front.

'*Tous mes compliments ! madame*,' he remarked, with an observant glance about him. 'You look remarkably well.'

She laughed jovially.

'But I don't look quite as I used to, in the

days when I had to call you out of your bed,' she said, in her deep throaty voice, the folds of flesh about her neck and breast still quivering in a chuckle, 'and you are not exactly growing handsomer yourself, Monsieur le Docteur. It is a pity one cannot always remain young and beautiful, *hein!*'

He scowled at her whimsically.

'I cannot distinctly remember when I was beautiful, and I try hard to forget that I was formerly young,' he said, gravely, but with a twinkling eye. 'I set myself now-a-days to the cultivation of contentment, and it is a tender plant to grow. It is ill weeds that flourish best, madame, like your regiment of graceless sons. You have never even the grace to be ill—none of you; it is shameful; as a matter of fact, I came out to see if you were not getting a little tired of such shockingly good health. And how do you expect me to live by it, madame, if you behave like that?'

She shook all over, and her laugh spread itself along the highway.

‘*Dame!* I had enough of you, doctor,’ she shouted cheerfully, ‘in the old days. Enough and too much—ten times too much, as my man used to say, when he counted the brats upon his fingers. I’ve got no use for you now; there’s *herbe de mon grand-père* on the roadside for a *tisane*, there’s fennel for tea, there’s wormwood for a bitter; that’s all the drugs I need now-a-days, and you see for yourself, I don’t get thin on ’em. Yet I was bad, too, last winter,’ she added, growing suddenly grave.

The doctor nodded inquiringly.

‘Yes; but it wasn’t a matter for medicine, *c’est-y-vrai*,’ she went on seriously. ‘I don’t suppose you could have done me any good. It was trouble, and then the cold—’*cré nom*, how cold it was! Never, never, never shall I forget that cold! *Oui, j’ai manqué de mourir*,’ she said, very impressively.

Suddenly all the lines on her face lifted and her cheeks puffed into laughter.

‘*Mais j’ai manqué!*’ she said, nodding her head gaily.

The doctor laughed a little too.

‘Yes, you must have had troubles,’ he remarked presently. ‘About your son, eh? And now there’s the child.’

‘Ah, I thought you had come about him,’ she broke in. ‘I guessed as much. Is he dead, the *pauv’ petit*?’

‘No. And I think he will live. But I am not sure that he will be—ah well, never mind that for the moment. You know he is with your *bru*?’

‘Yes. What does she want him for, when she would not have him before? She’s got her own child—not that I mind, if it pleases her, *dame*! She’s a good little woman, and Laumec’s treated her badly. For me, she may do as she likes . . . but still—’

The doctor became aware that he and Madame Le Braz were regarding each other furtively.

‘Look here,’ he said. ‘We are playing at *cache-cache*. I know what happened and you guess; I thought you would. And I suspect

you know what's the mischief with . . . with *her*. As to the boy, it doesn't very much matter, now; I doubt nothing will make much difference to him, poor little devil. It's your *bru* that I am concerned about.'

'I've expected it all along,' she said, with a sigh. 'I thought it might come to worse, even, than it has. Yes, one has got to think mostly of *her*, now.'

They had a long talk together, and the doctor went away, a little relieved from his anxiety.

'A good soul, a jolly old soul,' he said to himself gratefully. 'The most sensible woman I know. I have a great respect for her, though I wish she could keep herself a little—cleaner: it wouldn't hurt . . . but it's a comfort, a decided comfort, that she thinks I have done right. Yes, she sees it's a chance, the only chance.'

So day after day, he went to the Clos à la Dame, saying little but observing the more; and day after day, he saw that 'Poldine was

attaching herself to the child with a more extreme affection, a love that was growing terrible in its intensity. But Jeannot lay quietly on the bed or in her arms, his eyes wide open and tranquil, his face as still and vacuous as stagnant water; till the doctor's suspicion grew to be a certainty, and he knew, at least, that 'Poldine would never again be maddened and driven to desperation by the gleeful laughter of his eyes. Yet he came and went as before, ready with soothing and encouraging words, and meditating how best to tell the truth presently, when it could no longer be hidden.

It was 'Poldine, after all, who spoke first.

Summer had come early, and the sun beat in hotly at the window; the room was hot and over bright, for the curtains had been taken down and the full glare came in unchecked. Yet in the hottest, sunniest corner, 'Poldine sat with Jeannot in her arms, rocking him to and fro with an endless patience.

'There is nothing that he cares for but light,'

she said to the doctor. 'Light and warmth,—it is very strange. All night long, and on dull days even, he cries and rolls his head from side to side ; and he never seems to look at anything but the sun or the sunshine. One would think that he can see nothing else.'

The doctor watched the child in silence, with a certain emotion in his face, and 'Poldine saw it.

'You don't mean—' she said quickly, and then she paused ; a sudden perception grew upon her. 'Yes,—I understand ; it is the fall.'

Her voice broke and was hushed ; the boy lay placidly in her arms, blinking at the sun. This time it was the doctor who spoke first, a little anxiously.

'You must take him out, now, as much as you can, let him have fresh air, sea air, let him see people about him, let him be with other children. There may still be an improvement, though I am doubtful,—I was afraid from the first.'

He cleared his throat and paused again to choose his words. 'He may grow quite strong,' he suggested presently. 'He is well enough even

now . . . and at the worst, *ma pauv' fill'*, you have a son of your own, a fine little healthy lad who will grow up to take care of you, and whom it is wicked to neglect as you do, yes, wicked.'

'Poldine looked up at him quickly.

'There are plenty of others who will care for *him*,' she said. 'He does not need me. But this one—'

She drew Jeannot closer into her arms, and smiled contentedly. Usually she practised a self-control, a careful continual restraint, which made her seem no less reasonable than other people; but for the moment, she was shaken out of it, and she forgot to hide herself from the keen observation of the doctor's watchful eyes.

'You thought it would make me unhappy, when I found it out,' she said, nodding her head triumphantly. 'And you were afraid to tell me. But that's all nonsense, and you don't understand . . . He's very pretty, very pretty, it doesn't make the least difference in him. His eyes . . . I used to hate them, but now they are like corn-flowers, just as blue; I think they are beautiful.

And he's so like Laumec . . . If he were to look at me, or smile, it would make me cry, because he's so like his father. I love him, I love him all the more,—and I am very glad, you don't understand, but I am very very glad . . . Some day, if he had laughed at me again like that—I do not know ; it is not me, it is some one else who gets into my hands, and then I cannot tell what they may do. But now there is no fear, he is all mine, mine and Laumec's . . . See, he has his father's face, and nothing of his mother, he has not her eyes any longer, no, not at all ; I know now, it was not he that I wanted to kill, but his mother in him.'

The doctor silenced her with a grave rebuking look.

'Take care, 'Poldine,' he said, quietly. 'Remember what I told you, when I let you nurse him ; that I would take him away if you got excited. If you let yourself talk like that, I cannot let you keep him.'

She uttered a sound like a beast bereft of its young.

‘You would not dare!’ she cried, and then, with a violent effort, she checked herself and fell a-trembling.

‘It is only because I love him so!’ she said, piteously. ‘You do not know, you do not understand . . . He is all that is left to me . . . And as for the other, I will be very kind, very kind, indeed,’ she went on, with an anxious conciliating meekness. ‘I will not neglect him any more. Perhaps he will be able to amuse Jeannot; yes, if only he will be very good to Jeannot, I will love him—I will try to love him as much as I can. Only, you must never, never, talk of taking Jeannot away from me, or—’

She looked at her hand with a little furtive smile as she held it out in front of her.

‘—or they—the people that take hold of me—might do more things: I don’t know what—’ she said.

The doctor muttered something to himself, and surveyed her for a while as if thinking deeply.

‘Well: we’ll see—’ he said, after a little, as if answering himself rather than her. ‘It’s im-

possible to tell—you must go out, *ma fill*', you need the fresh air as much as the boy. Go out, stay out: stay all day if you like, and come in so tired that you are ready to go to bed, and to sleep sound all night long. Yes, I know you are sleeping badly now, both of you—that's why you must go out. Take the boy—take both the children, if you like, to the *plage*, and sit among the rocks in the sun ; that will do good to all of you. And you must eat well, remember: unless you sleep and eat, and get plenty of fresh air, you will not be able to take care of Jeannot—do you understand? he said, wisely, getting on to his feet. 'He will need you very much, you know ; you will have to do everything for him, and he will like you better than any one else. Though he may not be able to show it a great deal, poor little lad—'

'Poldine smiled happily, her tranquillity restored.

'Yes, and now he will be mine, all mine, and Laumec's—' she said. 'No one else will want to take him away from us. Only—'

A sudden frightened bewilderment swept across her face, and her lips trembled: she looked like a child that is going to cry.

‘I forgot—’ she said. ‘The eyes—that was my penance—but now there is no penance, no punishment, and perhaps the *bonne Vierge* has not forgiven me, neither the *bonne Vierge* nor Laumec,—oh, what shall I do, what shall I do? They cursed me, both of them; but I thought if I was very patient, and if I did penance, they would forgive—’

‘So they will, so they will;’ and the doctor stifled a qualm of conscience. ‘I take it on myself to say they will—only the penance the Virgin has set you is different from what you expected, that’s all. Different, and I don’t say it isn’t harder—don’t you understand, you will have to take care of Jeannot always; even when he has grown into a man, and yet is like . . . that? Ah, it is hard enough, your penance, take my word for it; you must keep strong, and cheerful, and reasonable, or you will not be fit for it.’

She smiled, gratefully.

‘It is because the *bonne Vierge* is so good, and was a mother herself,’ she said, with conviction, ‘that she has been so kind to me, so forgiving. She knows it is such an easy penance, and one that makes me so happy, to take care of Jeannot ; and surely she will keep me fit for that, whatever happens . . . If only she can persuade Laumec that it is enough ; for he is not gracious and pitiful like her, he is . . . just a little . . . hard, and then he is angry, and would like me to be well punished ; you see, he is a man, and it is different . . . But, perhaps the *bonne Vierge* will persuade him that it is enough ?’ she repeated, anxiously.

‘Certainly—I am sure of it !’ said the doctor with enthusiasm as he left the room.

‘It is a risky experiment, for the girl is mad, or next thing to it,’ he muttered to himself, as he went down the stairs. ‘But I don’t fancy there’s much danger of anything happening now ; the excited stage is past, so long as she is not roused, and she’s travelling fast to mere childishness,

when she'll be happy enough, poor thing . . . These puerperal cases are the very devil . . . But I wouldn't answer for the consequences if the child were taken from her. I never saw anything like her face when she looks at the boy ; it makes me think of some of the old Madonnas—'

When he emerged into the light, in the small court below, he glanced up, with an apologetic amusement, at the white church spire that lifted itself above the roofs.

'And I to have taken on myself to answer for the *bonne Vierge*,' he said, with a chuckle. 'I, of all men—but it all comes of being a doctor, which is next door to a priest . . . or an old woman. One's got to take the conventions in the day's work.'

'Poldine took Jeannot out after that, out on to the beach below the walls, where there were many sheltered corners among the rocks ; one could sit there, unseen, for long hours at a time, with nothing in the world to do but to think, or what was easier, to talk. . . . She told her

mother, dutifully, that she might come too, if she liked, and bring the baby.

‘But he will have to be very good and very quiet, for if he cries and disturbs Jeannot, I will throw him into the sea,’ she said, with a mischievous delight in the old woman’s visible fright and horror.

She did not really mean what she said—the words came to her without thinking; only she much preferred to go out alone, and had suggested their coming merely as a matter of obedience to the doctor.

‘But I did not promise that I would *make* her come with me, even if she was afraid,’ she confided to Jeannot, ‘that would be very unkind . . . and it is so easy to make her afraid, and she is so funny when she is frightened; she creeps along the wall like one of the wriggling grey things I see at night. And besides, if he cried, and you did not like it, I believe I *would* throw him into the water . . .’

It was very pleasant to sit in the shade upon the beach, in the warm purple shadows, with the

rocks all about one in their infinite variety. Where the water bathed them at each recurring tide, they were ghostly with a pallid covering of innumerable barnacles, or fringed and cushioned with soft, glittering, golden-brown varech and goëmon ; higher up, beyond the reach of the waves, they were resplendent in a coat of many colours. Here they were gay with small lichen in orange and willow-green, with tufted sea-pink, with the white bloom of scurvy-grass, and clumps of golden-yellow vetches ; there were patches of scabious, and slender single poppies, and an exquisite tender green of swaying grass ; while, everywhere, the barren rock itself sparkled as if spread with a glittering dust of silver and gold, and the ash-coloured sands shone in a myriad points of fire, leaping back to the sun from a myriad tiny scales of mica.

'Poldine, who had turned garrulous of late, since she found that the sound of her voice soothed Jeannot to a greater peacefulness, babbled to him sometimes of the old stories that here or there, in long ago childish days, she

had heard and not forgotten ; old stories that she chanted to him, with added fancies of her own, and an accompaniment of plashing water. And one of these was of that fine gleaming dust, that lay imbedded in the rocks, and powdered with diamonds the ash-coloured sands ; that wonderful, useless treasure of cat's gold and silver. . . .

The tale that she chanted softly to the boy, who saw nothing but the sunshine, was of the fairies, the fairies who had danced here, on these same broad sands, long ago, when the world was young. The fairies who danced all the night through, in long twisting lines and circles, turning, leaping, till it made one giddy only to think of it ; but always dancing, dancing. . . . And one night twelve young men went out from the town, their heads hot with wine, and their heels light, to dance with the fairies and to make a mock of them ; but their tongues were loosened with the wine, and they were over bold in their laughter. So the fairies, being angry,

changed them, the twelve young men who had gone out from the town to dance with them, and to make a mock of them, into twelve cats ; yes, six of them into six big black cats, and six of them into six pretty little white ones. And that was what came of the wine, and the mocking, and the dancing.

.

But the fairies did not wish to be unkind, for they were good little people, honest little people, though they danced all the night through. And they said to the cats, the six big black cats, and the six pretty little white ones, 'Go, go quickly to the beach, and gather together all that you find there that shines, shines like fire ; and when you have spun of it for each of us a cloak of gold, and a cloak of silver, then we will forgive you. . . . But you must gather, and you must spin only so long as Gros Gogo in the church steeple takes to strike twelve, at midnight—.'

.

And when, after as many years as there are islands in the sea, the work was done, and for every fairy there was a cloak of gold and a cloak of silver, the cats, the six big black cats, and the six pretty little white ones, were free again, and the twelve young men that came out from the town, full of wine, to dance and to mock, went back once more, but they had had neither dancing nor mocking.

.

‘ And so,’ Poldine chanted to Jeannot, who saw nothing but the sunshine, ‘ that is why we call it cats’ gold and silver, and why, when a big black cat, or a pretty little white one, purrs and bakes with both its paws, we say it is spinning. . . .’

.

And she told him, sometimes, of the wicked princess that swims in the sea, the wicked princess Dahut, that bewitches little children, so that they fall in and are drowned ; and of all the wonderful things that live besides in the

water ; of the sound of singing and church bells that are heard when one sails over where once long ago there was a village or a town, and how, when one hears them, one must say an Ave, so that some day, some day at least, the poor drowned folk may be able to rest, and to come out of the wet water.

Or sometimes it was of the Loup Garou, as it goes, the night long, from cross to cross ; or the White Ladies that weep and wring their hands, and flit up and down the dark stairs of old houses ; or of Our Lady of the Grand' Porte, who walks and watches upon the ramparts, whenever there is evil near, or danger coming from the sea.

And then, as the days went by, and her fancies grew more real, and the dim world of her imaginings pressed more nearly to her ; she gathered Jeannot closer in her arms, and whispered to him all the dreams she dreamt, all her wonderful foolish visions ; the things that came, talking in her ears and plucking at her fingers, things that were black and odious,

grey things, and horrible red ones,—and the *bonne Vierge* herself that walked amongst them, and made them turn all beautiful, but not Laumec, never Laumec, who had not yet forgiven. . . .

.

It was very beautiful, the sea, very marvellous, she said fearfully, only so big and so strong. . . . And all the little white sails upon it, the myriads and myriads of tiny white sails that floated on the tipmost top of every wave, the little white crests—these were the sails of all those that had gone down, the Terreneuvas and the Islandais, the poor dead boats that had gone down, down, where the water was so deep and cold, and the fog lay heavy upon it, so heavy that it had driven the boats down . . . or perhaps they were the hands, the white shining hands of all the people who lay at the bottom of the sea, drowned, and looking up, up, through the green water, with their white eyes, to the sky.

.

'I can tell *you* this, *mon fi*', she said to the boy who lay in her lap and saw nothing but the sunshine, 'for you will understand. They think you do not hear when they speak to you, because you look always the same . . . but they are very very foolish and ignorant; we know more than they do, you and I, only we keep it to ourselves, all to ourselves. . . . And so one says nothing, nothing at all, to the silly little *bonne femme* that is frightened, nor to the fat baby that snores, nor to the doctor that looks at one's hands, and stabs one with his knives, the sharp knives that lie at the back of his eyes. Yes, you must be *quite* sure to tell nothing at all to any of *them*, or they would not let us come out any more,' she said, cunningly.

.

But on the days when the wind rose and the sky was covered, when the sea rolled up noisily and flung itself in a long fringe of white foam upon the beach, she was troubled

and restless, and she cried sometimes, as Jeannot did because there was no sunshine for him to look at. And at such times she wandered about the rocks, slipping and stumbling on the seaweed, with the child heavy in her arms, and both of them wailing and whimpering with a long persistence. Only when some one came near her, she checked herself still: as at night she went home with a tranquil face and bright large eyes, her cheeks pink by reason of the wind and spray and the salt strong air; constraining herself to be so cunningly calm and reasonable, that only the doctor guessed, and that barely, of the quick change that was coming over her; the change that was making her into a little child again, a child as mindless and as pitiful as Jeannot.

Yet, so long as the sun shone, she was entirely happy; happier indeed, as time went by, and she lost the sense of many things, living in a world alone with Jeannot, whence she only came out if others spoke to her, or when the doctor looked at her with his eyes that cut like sharp

knives. She was entirely happy, all the long hot hours upon the beach, when she babbled to Jeannot of all her thoughts, her pitifully small thoughts, which yet he could not understand, he, who could see nothing but the sunshine. She was entirely happy . . . save for one haunting trouble that clung to her still, the fear that Laumec had not forgiven her.

The *bonne Vierge* might come down from her altar, and walk graciously with them on the sands; the tapers that were burnt before her might flicker down in a long shining row, with red gowns and ruffs about their necks like the beadle up at the church; yet Laumec . . . Laumec would not listen to reason, would not listen to the *bonne Vierge*, would not forgive 'Poldine, because she had set herself up against him, because she had killed the eyes of La Goutte. And it seemed to her that the hand he had stretched out to her when he went away, the hand that cursed her, lay heavily upon her head and squeezed it till it

grew into a block of ice . . . or was it a red burning coal?

It was intolerable to feel it, that hand, which even the *bonne Vierge* herself could not take away; surely, if Laumec only knew how much 'Poldine and Jeannot loved each other now, he would forgive, would lift his curse off, would take his hand away—

.

She held Jeannot in her arms, where she stood ankle-deep in the goëmon at the seaward edge of the rocks; the sun fell full upon him and he felt the warmth of it and was satisfied: he stared up at the sky with Laumec's face and the blue empty eyes which saw nothing but the sunshine.

'Poldine was talking—not to him, nor to herself, but to Laumec, who could hear her after all, who was listening, some where out in the midst of all that noisy, restless, heaving water.

'You see, I love him so much now,' she said, 'more than anything else in the world.

Before, it was only because I did not know; if I had known, I would have loved him at once. And then, it was so difficult to change—I did not hurt *him* when I pulled him off your shoulder; it was only his mother that I killed, his drunken mother that laughed at me out of his eyes. . . . He is very strong and beautiful now, much more beautiful than before, and all mine, mine and yours . . . but now you understand, because you have forgiven.'

And then she paused as if to listen, and presently laughed a little, contentedly.

'Yes, now he understands, he says he understands, and he has forgiven, I hear him singing—'

Was it the wind, or the waves, or the gulls circling about her, or was it Laumec kneeling before the little white Virgin in the cabin of the *goëlette*—?

.

With the autumn came the boats and the steamers, and the roads were loud with the

tramping feet of Terreneuvas and Islandais. And on the cale as every boat came in, 'Poldine and Jeannot were there to meet it ; she, neat and trim and smiling, in her black dress and spotless coiffe ; he, with blue eyes that saw nothing but the sunshine. And amongst the men that landed, 'Poldine found always one that none else could see, whom she greeted with little outbursts of happy laughter ; and the others stood aside, whispering, and watching as she walked up the quay, babbling incoherently, with that space beside her which her eyes filled with Laumec. It seemed sometimes to those who looked on, that he was so surely there, that it must be they who were blind and could not see, could not see anything but the empty space that walked beside her.

And Laumec came home to 'Poldine and Jeannot every time that a boat came in from the Banks ; but to the others, who were blind and could not see, he returned not at all. He had stayed behind, he and his comrades. The little white Virgin in the cabin of the goëlette,

and the good boat, the *Dieu Protège* herself—stayed behind, in the midst of the fogs, and the green water, and the barnacles, the barnacles that grew so fast, like a great grey winding sheet; stayed behind, or perhaps they had gone further still. . . .

‘Ave, Maris Stella . . .
Felix Coeli Porta.’

THE END

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